

Knightmare #3

Fortress of Assassins

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Treguard heard Dugald gasp and glanced along the corridor ahead. A creature out of nightmare stood there. It was more than ten feet tall; four arms as thick as trees each wielded a burnished bronze axe. Its ghoulish green face was highlighted by red eyes set into sunken sockets, and yellow fangs like sickle blades hooked over its lower lip. Its body pulsed with green light, one instant appearing leathery and insubstantial, the next dissolving into an outline of green vapour from which the body emerged again a second later.

A splintering sound from some way behind told them that their pursuers were breaking through the door. They were now trapped between the Assassins and this axe-wielding jinni . . .

The last words of a dying Knight Templar send Treguard, lord of Knightmare Castle, off on a quest to the Holy Land in search of the true heir to the throne of England – the son of Richard the Lionheart. But his quest is one of danger; can he survive in the lands of the Assassin hordes? Read and learn from Treguard's adventure, for you too must prove your worth as a knight as you face the ultimate challenge – the fearsome tests and traps of the awesome Knightmare Castle dungeons.

Knightmare: Fortress of Assassins is the third title in a series based on the award-winning ITV game series, *Knightmare*.

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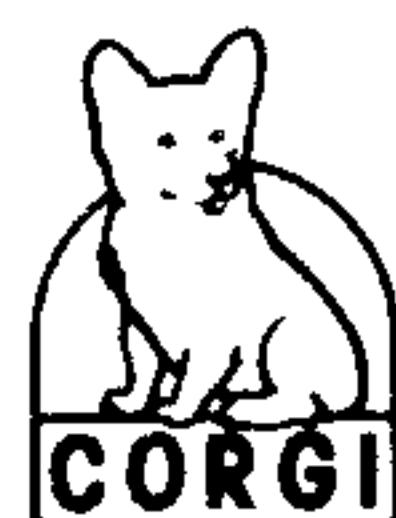
KNIGHTMARE

KNIGHTMARE: THE LABYRINTHS OF FEAR

Knightmare

Fortress of Assassins

DAVE
MORRIS



CORGIBOOKS

FORTRESS OF ASSASSINS

With thanks to Oliver Johnson for his help

KNIGHTMARE 3: FORTRESS OF ASSASSINS
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PROLOGUE

The Syrian Desert, AD 1212

The caravan hurrying through the low dunes was not the usual assortment of merchants and pilgrims journeying between Hamadan and Aleppo. For one thing, there were but six people in the entourage and only eight camels – a far smaller party than would usually brave the threatening wastes of the desert, infested as it was with brigands and predatory animals. And it seemed that the party were trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. There were none of the usual gay trappings of bells and coloured tassels hanging from the camels' saddles. The bales of silk and silver that they had borne from Hamadan were swathed in a dull, dun-coloured cloth. So also were the merchants themselves, as though they preferred to blend against the background of rolling dunes all about them.

The caravan was in a hurry – that much could be seen from the sand kicked up in their wake, and the sweat-streaked, dusty faces of the men. At intervals two of the men would stop to cast anxious glances back in the direction they had come. The scene behind them was one to frighten the most hardened of desert travellers: a purple-black cloud, spinning dust devils marking its inexorable progress over the

yellow dunes, was bearing down on them from the east. This would have been cause enough for alarm – caravans much larger than this one had been lost forever in such a sandstorm – but it was not the impending storm that filled the men's hearts with dread.

The two who kept stopping to look back were brothers, merchants of Venice – by the look of them too elderly and comfortable to undertake such a journey unless it promised great rewards. Their guards, grim-faced Frankish veterans, were armed with winch crossbows and swords of tempered Toledo steel. They walked with blades bared, anticipating danger.

Over the course of the day, first one and then the others had thought to see a black-garbed figure walking steadfastly in pursuit of them on the very fringe of the dust storm. It had seemed like some unstoppable creature out of Hell. Now, as the sun sank lower in the sky, the shadows at the centre of the storm grew more impenetrable and wind whipped at their cloaks. The storm was upon them.

'Santino,' cried one of the merchants in a voice edged with fear, 'we must abandon it! What are two hundred ducats compared to our lives?'

'Have you so readily forgotten the precepts of our father?' the other jeered back at him, fearless and indomitable where his brother trembled with fear. '*Never surrender what is rightfully yours* – those were his words, Giacomo. Even in these heathen lands, the law of possession must hold. I paid a fair price for the thing and it is ours.'

Just as these words were out of his mouth, a searing blast of hot air struck them as if a furnace

door had opened in the east. A wall of stinging sand flew into their faces. They hunched down and struggled through the cauldron of dust towards the fast-disappearing rumps of the camels.

'Close up!' the elder brother, Santino, yelled to their guards. Faint answering cries came back to them through the howling storm. Presently they saw three of the guards urging the camels back against the brutal strength of the wind. Of the fourth guard there was no sign.

'By San Rocco, where's Barthelemeo?' hollered one of the guards. 'He'll be lost – we must follow him! Barthelemeo!'

'Don't be a fool. It would be the end for us all if we did that.' Santino was still ice cool despite the danger.

A faint answering cry came out of the swirling dust ahead. Before the others could stop him, the man who had called out blundered off into the storm, his cloak snapping about him until he was lost to view. A heartstopping scream followed a few seconds later. The remaining four stood transfixed, nerveless hands clutching at their weapons. They backed away together, their eyes desperately seeking for signs of attack.

'Over there!' another guard screamed. They all whirled to face in the direction of his shaking crossbow. A shadowy form was materializing with faltering steps out of the storm. It was Barthelemeo, the hood of his desert cloak swept back so they could recognize his ashen face. A gush of bright blood covered the front of his chest, and a bubble of it formed on his lips as he tried to speak. No sound came above the shriek of the wind. Instead he

pitched forward at their feet. Now they could see that the man's throat had been cut from ear to ear. He was still trying to say something. The younger of the brothers leaned down; he could just make out what Barthelemeo was saying: 'Master, beware . . . he is like the desert wind . . . I never saw him.' The guard twitched once, then lay still.

Giacomo got to his feet hastily. Just as he did, another of the guards gave a cry, his crossbow discharging harmlessly into the air. A jagged black throwing knife protruded from his neck, just under the ear. Even before his dead body pitched forward into the sand, Santino had drawn his sword and launched himself in the direction of the attack.

It was his last living action. As if wielded by an invisible attacker, a scimitar flashed out of the stinging wall of sand, severing his head from his body with one blow. Giacomo stood transfixed as the head rolled across the sand towards him, leaving a crescent-shaped trail of blood behind it. It came to rest against his foot. Santino's eyes stared up at him with the same cold imperious glare they had possessed in life. Giacomo slowly dragged his gaze up from his brother's head, his sword dangling uselessly by his side. He was not surprised to see that, somehow, the fourth of their guards had now joined the others in death. He had not even seen the blow that had opened up his rib cage so neatly that his vital organs had fallen to the ground between his feet. Giacomo heard a whimper of fear; it came from his own throat.

Suddenly the wind dropped, leaving a hollow silence. The swirling dust clouds drove off to the west in the direction of the setting sun, casting an

eerie purple shadow over the scene of carnage. Giacomo hardly noticed the storm's passing. All his attention was focused on the figure who stood in front of him – a tall warrior clad from head to foot in the black robes of the Assassins. The scimitar that had beheaded Santino still swung from one hand, its sharp blade caked with dust and blood.

'Saints . . .' moaned Giacomo. His hand brought his sword up in a hopeless gesture, but he lowered it again under the scrutiny of the Assassin's eyes. Partially veiled by the swathes of the burnouse, they were of the deepest blue that Giacomo had ever seen; even the waters of the Venetian lagoon could not compare to their oceanic depths. In the face of that cold gaze, his resolve melted. The sword fell from his fingers and he sank to his knees on the sand.

He sensed the black-clad figure walking closer . . . and past him. Giacomo stared up, slack-jawed; he had expected to die. The figure stood silhouetted against the sullen glow of the sun as it sank beyond the westward-driving storm. With superhuman strength, the Assassin flung aside the boxes and saddle-bags that had been slung over the camels. With a savage downward sweep of the scimitar, the brass binding of a chest was smashed open and delicately embroidered Chinese silks spilt out. These the Assassin tossed into the evening breeze like so many worthless rags.

Giacomo knew what it was that the stranger sought. 'There,' he pleaded, pointing to one of the camels. 'Take it; only let me live.'

Striding over to the bundle he had indicated, the Assassin tore it down and unfurled the cloth wrapping.

A sword lay revealed – a sword whose blade shone with the white light of heaven. A black-gloved hand reverently took up the sword and raised it aloft, holding its hilt up to the sunset. For the last time, Giacomo saw the delicately worked hilt: a lion's head of gold with two amethysts for eyes. They blazed as if on fire in the orange glow.

At last the Assassin uttered a sound. It was a feral cry that rang out across the sands like the call of a jackal. Then, uttering a low laugh of triumph, the Assassin pulled aside the black veil. As Giacomo slipped into grateful unconsciousness, the sight of the Assassin's face lingered in his mind like a brand that had been burned on to his eyes. He would remember that face to his dying day.

The Assassin was a woman . . .

CHAPTER ONE

'I've always heard it said that the finest wines should have a good body,' remarked Treguard drily.

'Agreed,' said his companion, Sir Edmund of Blaye, 'but I fancy this oversteps the mark.'

They were standing in front of one of the many man-sized barrels in the duke's wine cellar. In the flickering torchlight, a pair of yellow-stockinged, cross-gartered legs could be seen protruding from the top of the barrel. The flagstones at their feet were slick with wine.

'Any idea who he is?' Treguard asked, with a nod towards the body in the hogshead.

Edmund shook his head. 'No, but we'll soon find out.' He gestured to the two mailclad men-at-arms who stood behind them. The soldiers placed their torches in brackets on the wall and manhandled the body out of the barrel. As they did so, more wine splashed on to the floor sending up an intoxicating smell into the dank confines of the cellar. Edmund and Treguard peered down at the corpse of the dark-haired youth which now lay at their feet, his clothes dyed a sickly pink through immersion in the wine.

Edmund stooped to peer at the corpse. 'His face looks familiar, but I can't quite place it.'

'Begging your pardon, sire . . . my lord Duns-helm . . .'

They both turned to the man-at-arms who had spoken. 'Well, what is it?' Edmund barked.

'Sire, that is Sam Longshanks, the new sewerman.'

'Or rather, it was,' mumbled the other soldier.

'Why, that's right!' Edmund exclaimed with sudden recognition. 'But why would anyone want to drown him – and in my best claret too?'

The two men-at-arms stared at each other uneasily. They obviously knew more than they were letting on.

'Well? One of you spit it out!' commanded Edmund.

The first soldier coughed and then continued. 'If you recall, sire, he was hired on from England – formerly in the employ of some lord there. Well, he wasn't very popular among the servants, I gather. Kept a bit too much to himself, and had furtive assignations in the town sometimes, I hear. And he was always pestering us, trying to curry favour by doing odd jobs and so forth.'

'He wanted to know when you were due to arrive, my lord,' said the other soldier to Treguard.

'Did he, by God?' Treguard stroked his black beard ruminatively. He was studying the puddle of spilled wine on the flagstones. Purple-red traces marked out a set of footprints leading from it to the cellar steps. He stooped and brushed his fingers across one. 'Bone dry,' he mused. 'It must have happened around midnight; the killer will be long gone by now.'

Leaving the soldiers to dispose of the body, Edmund led Treguard back to the Great Hall. 'What do you suppose this all means?' he asked when sure they were alone.

Treguard paced angrily before the hearth. 'It seems woefully clear. King John is a suspicious man; such a one is not happy until he has a spy in every nook and cranny. This Longshanks was placed here to report on who visits you – and the conversations you have had with them. That he was murdered indicates he eavesdropped on what I said to you at dinner last night. His spymaster here in Gascony is obviously careful and callous, leaving no weak link whereby we might trace him.'

Sir Edmund nodded his head morosely. A thin wiry man, he was twenty years older than Treguard and had long lost the fiery spirit of his youth. His robes were musty and moth-eaten – hardly in keeping with his position as Castellan of Blaye, the mighty fortress on the Gironde River which had for many years withstood attacks from both pirates and French fleets trying to capture the vital trading city of Bordeaux.

Like many English knights and lords, Edmund had lost much of his wealth during King John's disastrous war with France. Like many others, his true allegiance had been to John's brother, Richard the Lionheart, dead now these thirteen years – thirteen years in which the invidious King John had plundered the land with harsh taxes, paupering the peasants and filling the barons' hearts with outrage at his excesses. When the Lionheart was imprisoned in Austria, John had conspired to keep him there; and after Richard's death he had murdered his own nephew as a precaution against losing the throne. His crimes were endless, and he knew no shame.

'Poor England,' groaned Edmund. 'She is in such sore need of a new king.'

Treguard took his shoulder in a strong grip. ‘That is why I am here,’ he said urgently. ‘The common people have always hated John, and few of the nobles now give him wholehearted support. As I explained last night, the time must soon come for a change.’

‘What hope for that?’ said Edmund with a sigh. ‘John’s spies report any plots against him, and he deals tyrannically with the conspirators.’

‘Not if all the lords stand united against him! We can force him to sign the Great Charter that is even now being drafted. It reaffirms the ancient customs of the land – those Saxon laws that the Conqueror promised his bloodline would uphold. With it, we can ensure justice for all Englishmen, of high and low birth. But we must stand firm together. If even one panics, John may divide and crush us.’

Edmund seemed hardly to have heard. Slumped in his chair with shoulders sagging, he now looked very old indeed. After a moment he looked up at Treguard and said quietly, ‘You don’t understand. Your visit here may have doomed me.’

Treguard stiffened, eyes blazing in a look that would have made any man quail. ‘Man, the Lionheart knighted you!’ he thundered. ‘Would he have done so if he knew what a whining poltroon you’d become in your old age? I’d do better to seek allies among the old washer-women of your kitchen!’

‘By God, I’ll take that from no man!’ cried Edmund. He leapt to his feet, face white with rage, and aimed a blow at Treguard’s face. It was a hard punch that turned the black-bearded swordsman’s head despite his great strength.

Looking back at Edmund, Treguard wiped a thin rill of blood from the corner of his mouth. He was

smiling now. ‘Aye, that’s the spirit that I was looking for,’ he said in an altogether gentler tone. ‘That’s the spirit that John Lacklands fears.’

Edmund stood for a moment in amazement, then suddenly stepped forward and seized Treguard’s arms in an embrace. ‘You’ve opened my eyes, Dunshelm,’ he said. ‘What does one life matter, after all – we all forswore any claim on our own lives when we took our oaths of Chivalry.’

‘Good!’ boomed Treguard. ‘You are with us, then?’

Edmund nodded. ‘Come hell or high water, I am.’

The next morning brought dark storm clouds in from the Atlantic; the surface of the Gironde River, sweeping in a wide arc in front of the grey keep of Blaye, was choppy and capped with white spume. Autumn leaves whirled about the courtyard as Treguard, dressed in a scarlet surcoat and black riding cloak, came down the steps from the hall accompanied by Sir Edmund.

To his surprise there were two horses standing saddled in the courtyard: a chestnut mare and a bay roan. A flaxen-haired youth, dressed like Treguard in armour and a riding cloak, was already mounted on the roan. He waited some distance off, beside the castle gate.

‘Who is that?’ said Treguard, turning to Sir Edmund.

‘Forgive me, Dunshelm; that is Sir Dugald of St Julien. I had intended for you to meet him earlier, but the murder in the cellars rather disrupted other plans. He told me that he wished to travel with you,

though he seems rather to have presumed on your permission on that point.'

'That he does. The normal rules of courtesy apparently mean nothing to these young lads today.' As he spoke, Treguard turned to inspect Sir Dugald again. The young knight noticed, and bowed his head respectfully. Treguard huffed: actions, not mere deportment, impressed him. 'Tell Sir Dugald I am honoured by his offer, but Treguard of Dunshelm prefers to journey alone. My thanks again for your hospitality, Sir Edmund, and for the loan of this fine horse.'

In one fluid motion, Treguard was down the few remaining steps and swinging himself into the saddle of the chestnut mare, the buckle on his baldric clinking lightly as he did so. A squire ran forward with his sword, Wyrmsslayer. The blade, freshly oiled, gleamed even in the dull light from the overcast sun. Treguard admired it for a moment, then sheathed it and watched while the squire buckled a longbow alongside the saddle. Lastly a shield was handed up to him, and this he slung across his back.

'Where now?' Edmund asked him. 'Have you more lords to recruit to the cause?'

Treguard shook his head. 'In truth, I expected few here on the continent; John's reduction in the import tax on wine from Gascony has made some men's fortunes in these parts.'

'Aye,' laughed Edmund. 'Well, even the Devil must have a few friends, eh?'

'Fewer with each month that passes, I hope. But before returning home, I have a letter from Archbishop Langton to deliver to the Abbot of St

Severin. The Abbey is not far from here, I understand.'

Edmund studied him under knitted brows. 'Within the Forest of Freneville. It's but a day's ride or so as the crow flies, though most would travel by a less direct route. The forest has an evil reputation: only holy men and fools dare to travel by its more ancient paths, and to my knowledge few of them complete the journey. Take a week or two, is my advice, Dunshelm. Skirt the forest and take the road from Escoloigne; it will bring you to the Abbey with less peril.'

Treguard shook his head. 'Time's too precious for that, my friend, now that your murdered servant's report is already on its way back to King John. I wish to reach Canterbury before the end of the month. My thanks for your hospitality; I hope we meet again in happier times.' Waving farewell to Edmund, he kicked the horse's flanks and cantered beneath the portcullis of the castle. As he passed Sir Dugald, he gave a curt nod.

The road that Treguard took inland was muddy from the rain that now lashed down from the west. Every now and again, a great gust of wind came in from the sea, flattening the small stunted bushes by the side of the road and sending trickles of water seeping through the links of his armour. To make matters worse, Sir Edmund's chestnut mare was highly-strung and skittish, and Treguard found himself having to keep a tight rein on her. He longed for his stallion, Black, whom he'd had to leave behind in England.

At first the road passed through the vineyards

surrounding Blaye. Miserable peasants in ragged tunics of fustian stood huddled under makeshift shelters, waiting for the rain to stop so they could continue picking the bunches of purple grapes that hung from the rows of vines. But soon the vineyards thinned out and were replaced by fields and isolated farms, many of which looked to be abandoned. French raids were now an annual occurrence in this part of Guyenne and many of the English knights had already given up trying to eke a living and returned home.

The road now began to wind up into some gentle hills, and Treguard turned his horse for one last look at Blaye. He cursed, not because the citadel was almost completely obscured by the wall of driving rain coming from the west, but because he saw that he had acquired a companion. Sir Dugald's white-flecked steed, mud splashed up to her fetlocks, was but a couple of bowshots behind. Dugald's cloak hung around him like a sodden rag – as indeed did Treguard's by this time – but there was a certain resolve about the way the young man sat his mount that told Treguard that he was not going to stop following merely on account of the rain.

Well, thought Treguard, if he really wants to tag along then that's his own business. But once we're in the Forest of Freneville, he'll have to look after himself. I've better things to do than play nursemaid.

Treguard turned his horse's head back down the muddy road. Ahead of him he could see the black outline of the forest limning the horizon. He had heard of the place's fell reputation even before Edmund's well-intended warning. Not only did outlaws and brigands hide out in its fringes, but in

the woodland heart dire creatures as old as Creation were said to dwell – ready at all times to seize upon pilgrims to the Abbey of St Severin the Silent which lay there. In fact, it was doubtful whether anyone would take the path Treguard now found himself on, had it not been for the existence of the Abbey. It had been founded eight hundred years before when a peasant, dumb since birth, stumbled on a spring at the centre of the forest. The legend of St Severin told how the youth had been miraculously cured of his affliction by the waters of the spring. Since that time pilgrims had come from all over, seeking cures for their afflictions, despite the terrible dangers that lay in the forest wastes. Sir Edmund supplied soldiers to accompany the larger groups of pilgrims who came in spring and summer; but at this time of year, the shorter days meant that few made the difficult journey – too few to justify an armed escort. The road into the forest was deserted except for Treguard and his unwanted companion.

Looking back, Treguard saw that Dugald had caught up somewhat and was now keeping a resolute thirty paces behind him, despite the appalling condition of the road. Treguard squinted at him through the drizzle; the young man was taller than he, and very nearly as big despite his youth. His helmet was pushed back, revealing drenched ringlets of corn-yellow hair plastered to his brow. Treguard had a sudden sense of familiarity. Could he have met this young knight before? It seemed unlikely; the last time Treguard was on the continent, Dugald could only have been nine years old at most.

The skittish mare carried him under the first dripping boughs and into the green depths of the

forest. Where a minute before his ears had been full of the thunder of the rain beating on the hood of his cape, there now followed a ghostly silence broken only by the distant pitter-patter of the storm beating on the canopy of leaves high above him. Below, where the path wound between the trees, it was like riding down the nave of a vast cathedral, the great spaces either side of the path disappearing off into the gloom of the overhanging trees.

All day Treguard travelled thus, Dugald a faithful shadow forever thirty paces behind. Every now and then Treguard passed wooden shrines by the side of the path. Small metal amulets hung from them. They were stamped with the effigies of eyes, mouths, legs, arms, even whole bodies – offerings by the pilgrims which indicated which part of themselves they had hoped to be cured by their visit to the spring.

If there were bandits about, they didn't disturb the fierce-looking Saxon lord, his hand ever hovering over the hilt of Wyrmsslayer. The day thus passed uneventfully and drew to its close, and as the light dimmed in the forest, Treguard guessed that he must now be near to the Abbey. Just as he thought this, he came to an unexpected branch in the road. He brought the mare to a halt while he pondered. His eyes had been searching ahead of him all the time, alert to any possible danger; it seemed to him that the second path had not been there a minute before. His horse, as if sensing something amiss, shifted uneasily beneath him. Treguard blew out a plume of breath in the cold air. The place pricked the hairs of his scalp, but anyone might feel such foreboding on a lonely woodland road at dusk. Perhaps he was more tired than he thought, and had just failed to notice the

unexpected branch. He peered at the two paths. One – the left-hand path – seemed more trampled than the other. This must be the way the pilgrims went.

Sinister . . . mused Treguard to himself. Normally he would avoid a left-hand path if possible, but here the logic of the situation outweighed any premonition. He spurred the horse forward.

Instantly he knew he'd made a mistake. A curtain of night, still darker than the encroaching dusk, fell over him like a blanket. The horse reared up in sudden panic, flailing its hooves against the air, and Treguard was thrown from the saddle. He landed heavily, the breath rushing out of his lungs. He groggily tried to get to his feet. It was then he saw what kind of place he was in.

It was an infernal glade, which even the last beams of dying sunlight seemed to flee from. The trees grew stunted and twisted here. In a monstrous parody of the pilgrims' shrines, the leprous-grey branches were festooned with a grisly load: the severed arms and legs and heads of wretched travellers, their bones still clothed in rotted white cloaks – the traditional garb of the pilgrim.

As Treguard watched, pallid snake-like roots began to worm towards him over the ground from the ancient lightning-blasted oak that stood at the centre of the clearing. He looked around for Wyrmsslayer. The strap holding it to his belt had snapped in the fall, and it lay a few paces away in the frothy mud. He lunged for it, but a root had wrapped itself around his wrist before the sword was half out of its scabbard. Another root whipped up around his throat. Before he could react, he was yanked off his feet and dragged through the bone-

littered leaf mould towards the sinister oak.

In front of him, the tree had begun to metamorphose. The holes and crevices in its scarred surface were altering, changing into the features of an old and very evil face. Two knotted craters turned into glowing eyes. A huge crack appeared at its base, revealing a mouth-like hole where white root tendrils writhed and churned. Treguard desperately clawed at the ground, trying to gain a purchase on something; but his gauntlets were slick with mud, and the ferns and roots slipped through his grasp. A branch swung down and grappled him round his midriff, lifting him into the air. Treguard twisted in the creature's hold, though the effort wrenched his muscles sickeningly. As it drew him to its maw, he braced his feet on either side of the fetid hole. The smell of mould and stagnant water made him gag, but he continued to struggle with all his might as the straining branches pulled him closer.

A dark blood-haze began to blur Treguard's vision. The branch wound around his torso made it difficult to suck air into his lungs. He bit his lip hard to stay conscious. If this was to be the end, Treguard of Dunshelm would fight until his last breath . . .

Just then he heard the thunder of hoofs and a fierce neigh. Dugald had followed him into the accursed glade! Retaining control over his frightened horse, the young knight was abreast of Treguard in an instant, his sword hewing through the branch holding him. Foul-smelling yellow sap oozed from the severed limb as Treguard fell heavily on to the ground. This time he had Wyrmsslayer in his hand in the space of a heartbeat. With a bellow of rage he was on his feet and laying about him at the roots and

branches that wormed out towards him. Dugald, still mounted on his horse, was doing likewise. The tree moaned eerily at every blow. Rattling its branches, it lashed out with whipping strokes. One caught Treguard over the eyes and left a stinging weal, but he only laughed in his terrible battle-lust and struck more mightily at the eldritch foe.

Finally the clearing was full of twitching severed branches. With a final horrible shriek, the tree began to dissolve into a grey slush. Soon all that was left of it was a steaming hole in the ground. The noxious gases that boiled up out of it might have come from the depths of hell itself.

Treguard turned to Dugald. The young knight was breathing heavily from his exertions in the fight, but managed to smile wryly back. 'A close fight, eh, Lord Dunshelm?'

'Without your bravery,' panted Treguard, 'it wouldn't have been a fight at all. I owe you my life, young sir; I am in your debt.'

Dugald smiled. 'That debt is easily paid. I ask only that you let me travel with you, as I've wanted all along.'

'That is well said, with the generosity of spirit that befits a true knight, and I agree gladly – though I still consider that I owe you a great service.' Treguard looked around; there was no sign of his mare. 'I'm too accustomed to my old warhorse – I shouldn't have let that chestnut throw me. Now the damned beast seems to have bolted.'

'Maybe your horse will find its own way to the Abbey, Lord Dunshelm. If not, I'm sure you'll be able to get one from the monks. In the meantime, mount up behind me.'

'That sounds an admirable idea,' Treguard agreed. In the gathering darkness, the clearing had begun to take on an even more desolate air. He was only too happy to swing himself up into the saddle behind the younger man.

Dugald steered his roan back to the fork in the track. As they set off down the true path to the Abbey, he added, 'You have a fine blade there, my lord.'

'Many's the time I'd have been lost without it,' admitted Treguard. 'I sometimes wonder if I oughtn't to rely less on magic.'

Dugald raised his eyebrows at this, but said nothing.

'I may as well know something about my rescuer,' Treguard went on from his perch behind Dugald's back. 'Tell me of your family.'

'There's little to tell,' Dugald replied. 'They have estates near Bordeaux; I am the youngest of three sons. My eldest brother was slain on the so-called Fourth Crusade, and my father died at a joust in the same year. Now I am come of age and have earned my spurs, I have an urge to travel. Perhaps I will go to the Holy Land. My brother has heirs of his own, and has no need of me.' He seemed on the verge of saying more, but fell silent.

Treguard was surprised by the strong determination he heard in Dugald's tone. 'How old are you?' he asked.

'Seventeen this summer.'

'That's almost too old to be a Crusader these days,' said Treguard. 'I've heard that children of eight or nine have been flocking to take the cross.'

'Aye, in their thousands,' confirmed Dugald.

'Poor devils – sickness and hunger accounted for most of them before they even reached Outremer, I've heard. Probably a better fate than they'd have suffered at the hands of a Saracen army, though.'

Both men now fell silent, locked in their private thoughts. Treguard's own experience of the Crusades had been in his mercenary days. It was after witnessing the atrocities of the Fourth Crusade that he had returned to the path of chivalry. Having seen the way that merchants turned those 'holy wars' to their own profit, he had developed a cynic's view. But what Dugald said disturbed him – should fighting men not be ashamed to squabble over the farms and vineyards of Europe while the Holy City of Jerusalem remained in heathen hands? When even children were prepared to fight and die for faith, could their fathers do less?

As he was thinking this, they at last came to a high creeper-clad stone wall. In the near darkness beyond, Treguard could see the walls of the Abbey rising up into the night and the stained glass windows of the Chapel of St Severin ablaze with colour from a thousand lighted candles as the monks observed vespers. Following the wall soon brought them to the Abbey gates and the horse was led away by the stable boys.

The guest-master, a short ginger-haired man with a broad smile, was overjoyed to see them. As he took them to the refectory, he explained that Treguard's steed had preceded their arrival by some minutes. 'It must once have been ridden by one of the soldiers escorting pilgrims here,' he said in a tone of wonder, 'and remembered the way after all this time. Fancy that!'

'In that case,' said Treguard gruffly, 'it's too bad the wretched beast didn't show a bit more initiative when I took it down the wrong path.'

They were sat at the abbot's table and waited for a few minutes until the monks began to file in from vespers. Abbot Gregory turned out to be a large florid man, who obviously enjoyed not only the sustenance of his faith but also the copious fare produced by the Abbey lands. He strode along the hall to embrace his guests, calling for beer and food as he did so.

'God be praised that you are here!' he said. 'When that riderless horse came through the gates, we feared the dryad had claimed another victim.'

'It will not ever do so again, my lord abbot,' said Treguard. 'I am pleased to say that God granted us the strength to slay it.'

A cheer went up from all the assembled monks at this news, for as well as terrorizing lone pilgrims, the dryad had carried off a number of the brothers over the years.

'In that case you are doubly most welcome!' cried the abbot. 'We shall feast in your honour.' He turned to the servants. 'Put away the beer; we shall have wine tonight. Also rissoles and cinnamon cakes.'

As they dined, Treguard and the abbot had a chance to speak at great length. Treguard described the battle with the tree-spirit, giving more credit to Dugald than to himself. The young knight blushed crimson at this, and tried to play down his part in the affair, but his protests were interrupted as more wine was pressed upon him.

After dinner, they went to take port with the abbot in his own lodgings. Dugald had drunk rather too

liberally in his relief at escaping from the dryad, and had to be supported by two lay brothers. When they were ensconced in front of the abbot's fire, Treguard made sure that Dugald was given water instead of port wine.

'It is actually rather curious, the manner whereby you came to us,' remarked Abbot Gregory as he handed Treguard a glass.

'Oh?' Treguard was surprised. 'How so?'

'Two warriors riding on a single horse. It is the emblem of the Poor Christian Knights of the Temple of Solomon.'

'The Knights Templar, yes.' Treguard sipped his port. He was wary of the Templars, who had a name variously for either fanatic worshipfulness or else heresy, depending on whom you listened to.

'A few days ago,' went on the abbot, 'an elderly member of the Order came here, seeking succour from the healing waters of the spring. After we'd put him up and he had drunk some of the water, we asked him where he came from. An interesting tale it was.'

There was a pause, and Treguard looked up expectantly.

'No, I won't recount it now,' said the abbot. 'Shortly you'll have the chance to hear it from him in person.'

Treguard exchanged a surprised glance with Dugald, who had sobered up a little after drinking the spring water. 'He's still here, then?' asked the younger knight.

The abbot nodded. 'He said he would die here, but that he had one last thing to do first. When we asked him what it was, he merely said that he awaited two

knights – one fair-haired, the other dark; the one a mere youth, the other a man in the prime of his years. I have heard that some Templars are given a gift for prophecy. Now, here you are.'

Prophecy – or *witchcraft* . . . ? Treguard was wondering. He said: 'What is this gentleman's name?'

'Hubert of Lindfield. He was badly wounded in battle against the Saracens twenty years ago, and has lived as a hermit in the Syrian desert ever since then. But he chose to come home to the west to die. The waters of the holy spring help to ease his old wounds, but he'll be dead before the winter is on us.'

'Where is he now?' asked Treguard, setting down his glass.

'In the infirmary. Since I see you've finished your wine, let me take you to him now.'

In a mixture of eagerness and trepidation, they followed the abbot through the cloisters and down a passage leading to the rear of the grounds. The infirmary stood alone in a small courtyard here, with the cemetery and outer wall of the Abbey just beyond. Feeble yellow candlelight shone through the leaded panes of a small upper window. Leading the way up a narrow flight of steps, the abbot came to a door and knocked softly. When a muffled reply came from within, he opened the door and ushered his guests through.

They found themselves in a plain white cell, the only furniture being a wooden bed on which lay a wasted figure, his gaunt face harshly underlit by the single tallow candle which was the only illumination. The old man raised himself painfully on his elbows

and the abbot quickly hurried to prop his back with a bolster.

'Sir Hubert, I think these may be the men you were awaiting . . . '

'I know they are,' the old man cut in, his voice thin and reedy as if honed by the desert winds in which he had spent a lonely twenty years. His fiery eyes took in the two knights in one burning glance. 'Welcome to you both. Dark and fair, older and younger; the description fits. Now, once I have given my message, these old bones can at last be laid to rest in the ground.' Satisfied at the eventuation of his prophecy, he lay back on the bed and let his eyelids flutter closed. Now he spoke as if in a dream, remembering events of long ago.

'It may surprise you, but my grandmother was of Saxon blood and taught me much of the way of wyrd – the destiny that our ancestors told us was ordained by the Almighty. Drawing my breath in this harsh world, until I am called by God to serve Him in the hereafter, I have seen the England of my birth reduced to a mockery of its former glory – its people beggared, its churches barred and ivy-grown, and even the Pope threatening to order a Crusade against its shores. So low have things fallen; my heart bleeds to think of it. John is but an unworthy shadow beside the only king to whom I ever gave my allegiance: Richard Coeur de Lion. It is for this reason I have spent the last years in exile in the desert.'

'But less than a year ago, as I slept in my lonely cave in the desert, a vision came to me – a vision out of my past. At first I thought I had died and had been raised up to Heaven. Once more I was with my king and, as in the past, he held a goblet of wine and

toasted the brave warriors that lived and died with him. Monfort, de Quercy, Talbot . . . the list is endless. All dead now, their bones bleached by the desert sands, and only I, to my shame, have lived to an old and feeble age. But my king seemed not to blame me for this. No, he turned to me and held the chalice out to me to drink as he used to do in life. "Lindfield," he said, "old crusading friend who has outlasted me thus: I have one last quest for you before you lay your bones to rest in the earth."

'I tried to speak my willingness to do anything, but because it was only a dream, no words came out. The vision of the king tilted the cup to my lips, and I seemed to drink, and as I drank the vision faded and the sound of his voice thundering in my ears became my own pulse . . .'

'What did he say?' asked Treguard, leaning over the figure on the bed. 'Did you hear the Lionheart's words?'

There was a very long pause. Just as they began to fear the old man had expired, he spoke again: 'I did not need to hear him; I know what he wanted of me. It was said among those in the king's entourage on the Third Crusade that he was travelling with his infant son whom a German princess had borne him – and indeed I saw myself the child on our arrival in Acre: a beautiful red-haired boy, the Lionheart's own heir as surely as the sun rises each day. I often wondered if he survived, and from my dream I am now sure that he did.'

A deep silence fell over the cell, a silence in which Treguard could hear his own heart beating fiercely in his chest. Richard had an heir? If this were so, he could find him – and return with him to throw King

John from the throne! Just as soon as these thoughts had come to him, though, nagging doubts entered his mind: what if the Templar's tale was nothing more than the ravings of a very old and sick man?

'Forgive me, Sir Hubert, but how can this be? Why in all these years haven't we heard of this before?'

'You must understand how things were in those days. King Philip of France had accompanied Richard, ostensibly as an ally, but he was never a good friend in adversity and soon returned home. Richard remained in the Holy Land and fought on, defeating Saladin at Acre and at Arfut, where I was wounded. Richard himself fell ill of a plague that swept our camp after that battle. He survived, but someone very near to him died.'

'Who was that?' Treguard asked eagerly.

'She was the child's mother, Elizabeth of Bohemia. She had eloped with Richard when he passed through Germany on his way to the Crusade. Soon after, Richard, overwhelmed by grief at her death, received news that John was planning to usurp the throne. Philip of France was helping him. He immediately resolved to return to England, but realized that taking the child with him would be too dangerous. He left him behind, and events proved him right – Richard was captured in Austria and handed over to Henry VI of Bohemia, the father of Princess Elizabeth, who had every reason to want to make Richard suffer. He spent the next year incarcerated in a dungeon until his subjects managed to raise the huge ransom demanded. Soon after his return he was killed in a French ambush, not far from this very place. Some say he was betrayed by his

brother John; I would be surprised if that were not true.'

'And what of the child?' Treguard interjected.

'I was coming to that. As you know, although they were mortal enemies on the field of battle, Richard and Saladin respected and admired one another above all other men. At the battle of Jaffa, for example, Richard's own mount was killed under him and Saladin, seeing this, stopped the fighting under a flag of truce while he sent across two of his own best horses to replace it.

'Perhaps it is because of this mutual respect that, when Richard signed the peace treaty with Saladin before his departure from the Holy Land, he gave the child into Saladin's safekeeping.'

'What?' gasped Treguard in astonishment. 'He gave the heir to the English throne into the custody of a heathen?'

'Don't be so surprised. As I said, Richard had a long and dangerous journey back to England. Even if he managed to get there safely, enemies awaited him and would have been glad to harm his child. Saladin was perhaps the only man he could trust. Besides, the treaty allowed Christians to visit Bethlehem and Jerusalem. The issue over which the Crusade had been fought had thus been resolved; he must have felt that with that treaty the crusading era was over.'

'So what became of the child?'

Sir Hubert shook his head sadly. 'Richard surely intended to send for him once he had dealt with his evil brother. Unfortunately, Saladin died two years after Richard left Palestine. Al-Adil, his brother, became Sultan in his place. I cannot guess what happened to the child; I had thought him dead, since

al-Adil was hardly as honourable a man as his late brother had been. Poor Lionheart! He and Saladin were so alike – such brave men, and with such treacherous brothers . . .'

The old man seemed to be sinking into delirium. Opening eyes like pools of water, he gazed wearily up at Treguard and the others.

'Fear not,' said Treguard. 'Your dream tells us the heir yet lives. We'll find him.'

'I do not fear,' replied Hubert in a barely audible whisper. 'I have delivered my burden. Now I surrender myself in body to the Lord Jesus, as I have always done in spirit.'

The effort of even this speech seemed to be more than the enfeebled body of Sir Hubert could bear. He slumped back on to his bolster, and, by the time the apothecary arrived in answer to the abbot's summons he had long since passed from the land of the living.

CHAPTER TWO

'Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness . . .' cried the weak voice, 'for they shall be filled; an' blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy . . . Please sirs, spare some bread or some copper coins - *anythin'* for the love of Heaven!'

Dugald and Treguard tried to look away from the face of the dying youngster as they rode past. Up here in the foothills of the Alps the air, which had been milder back in France, already had the sharp bite of winter in it. Both of them knew that the pitiful youth lying by the side of the rutted track in his torn and ragged cloak would not be alive in the morning.

Treguard shook his head sadly. It had been the same story everywhere since they had left Grenoble and come across the first signs of the ill-fated Children's Crusade; groups of aimlessly wandering young Crusaders, desperately hoping to find a way to return home. Each sad figure seen was a silent statement to the futility of their venture. At first Treguard and Dugald had been generous with the money and the provisions which they had brought with them from the Abbey, but yesterday they had realized that if they continued to give to the youngsters, they too would as likely wind up dead in the mountain passes. Thus they had agreed they

must ignore their knightly vows of charity, hardening their hearts against such appeals. All day they had tried, and all day they had failed.

The road they had taken across the Rhone valley had been uneventful until they reached Grenoble. After that it had become like a glimpse into a nightmare, the gaunt figures of the erstwhile young Crusaders huddled together in ditches and by the sides of the road. The so-called Children's Crusade was ending with as much tragedy as it had begun in hope. The same villagers who in the spring had welcomed them as holy innocents, and had freely given food, now shut their doors at the sight of any forlorn young wayfarers. Treguard and Dugald saw even clergymen (the parable of the Good Samaritan apparently forgotten) cross the road to avoid the youngsters who cried out importunately to them.

The scenes of death contrasted starkly with the beautiful panorama that had confronted them in the far distance since leaving Grenoble. The white-capped Alps soared into the eastern sky, rising above the verdant green of the undulating hills. But, as always at this time of year, the mountain tops were draped in banks of thick snow-laden cloud.

Treguard spurred his horse on up the incline of the road that was zig-zagging through the mountain pastures of the foothills. Soon they would come to the slopes of the mountains proper, with their terrifying series of switchbacks which would lead them up to the Mont Cenis pass. From there the road dropped down into Italy and to Genoa, where they hoped to find a ship to take them on to the Holy Land.

Treguard sensed that Dugald's mount had dropped back. He turned to see the younger man lean from his saddle and hand half of his last remaining loaf to the dying boy. Treguard shook his head, as much in admiration as exasperation. The more time he had spent with Dugald on the road, the more he had come to like and respect him, but Treguard doubted whether the younger man had a hard enough heart to make a great warrior. The scene he witnessed seemed to confirm this; Dugald's generosity could very well condemn them both to starvation in a few hours' time – if, that was, the snowstorm that was even now sweeping down the slopes of the Alps didn't bury them first.

The chestnut mare stumbled on the rocky scree of the path as Treguard stared up at the advancing storm, and he had to hold the reins of the horse with an even tighter grip. Sir Edmund's mount was as skittish as ever, and was definitely unnerved by the all-pervasive stench of death which had hung about their route all day. Dugald caught up with Treguard, concern registering in his face as he saw the roiling clouds fall through the gaps between the mountains and hurtle down towards them.

'Will we make it through the pass by nightfall?' he asked uncertainly.

Treguard looked once more up at where the path swept up a series of sharp ledges to a distant V-shaped notch between two mountains. That was their objective, but the lowering clouds were already blanketing the scene. Treguard knew that the pass could soon be blocked by deep snow-drifts that might last until spring. But to turn south now and head through Languedoc could cost them precious weeks

or even months . . . He made up his mind in an instant. 'We'll have to hurry!' he shouted to Dugald, spurring the mare on to one further effort.

For an hour their horses scrabbled on the rough path, their shoes sparking on the rocks as they struggled for purchase. The air became much colder as they broke the treeline. The clouds swept down on them, blasting them with freezing hail and snow. Soon icicles formed on Treguard's beard and eyebrows and all his limbs ached with the intense chill. But at least he had become inured to such hardships by his life in the far north of England. Dugald was suffering from the cold far more; his face had turned quite blue. Furthermore, it was becoming difficult to keep to the path, as the hurtling snatches of clouds obscured their vision.

The mare suddenly reared up on her hindlegs, nearly throwing Treguard. He calmed the horse, then looked to see what had startled her. A youth stood in front of them leaning on a staff, staring intently down the path in Treguard's direction, but in such an unflinching manner that he realized the boy to be dead, frozen to the spot as he waited for a friend – perhaps the same lad that Treguard and Dugald had passed at the bottom of the mountain. Soon they passed the horrifying sight of a group of corpses sitting crosslegged in a huddle, their bodies encased in frost.

Treguard and Dugald tried to ignore these scenes as best they could, dismounting to lead their horses upwards through the blizzard. Occasionally, when the wind abated, they saw precipitous drops of thousands of feet falling away on one side of the path, while on the other their track was almost overhung

by the soaring mountains. Already the snow was banking up above them in threatening drifts.

'Watch out for avalanches!' Treguard shouted to his companion, but wasn't sure whether the younger man had heard him above the howling of the wind. They struggled on, the path steepening as it started to ascend the side of Mont Cenis itself. Dugald stumbled over something, landing face to face with a frozen corpse. Treguard grabbed his arm and helped him up. He could hear Dugald muttering a prayer through his chattering teeth.

'Steady, lad; we're nearly there,' Treguard screamed over the wind. But he too felt afraid now. Both of them had heard the legends telling that the Cenis pass had been carved out of the mountain by giants and paved with the bones of human sacrifices. Now the grey bulks of the mountains looming out of the storm did seem to resemble giants, and the sound of the moaning wind could have been the death sighs of their victims. Another flurry of snow blinded Treguard. He hastily wiped his eyes clear only to find Dugald halted by his side, his outstretched hand pointing at something in front of them up the path.

'Ghosts,' he whispered.

Treguard could see what he saw now, the scene lit by the eerie luminous half-light of dusk; grey wraith-like shapes, manifestations almost of the whirling clouds themselves, were tumbling down the slopes above them towards where they stood. The figures were wearing the white capes of the Children's Crusade, accentuating their ghostly appearance. But now Treguard heard angry shouts echoing off the rock faces of the mountain, and rocks came spinning

out of the mists towards them, clattering down the steep slopes behind. No ghosts these, then, but a group of youngsters, so desperate to survive the night that they would attack and murder any traveller passing over Mont Cenis. As like as not they would eat their horses when they discovered how little bread was in Treguard's and Dugald's saddle-bags. They might even resort to cannibalism if they had to. He drew Wyrmslayer grimly. Killing such unfortunates was not something Treguard had any stomach for, but neither was providing them with his flesh for supper. Dugald, too, was trying to draw his sword from its iced-up scabbard, but was momentarily stunned when a rock caught him a glancing blow on the head.

'Stop!' bellowed Treguard at the top of his lungs. Even in the almost deafening wind, his shout echoed from mountain to mountain. The group of ragged assailants halted a couple of spearlengths away, boulders and jagged rocks poised in their hands ready for throwing. Just then, it seemed as if the mountain giants stirred in their slumber. There was a long-drawn-out roar as of surf retreating from a pebbly beach and, looking up, Treguard saw that a vast overhang of ice and snow had broken away from the side of the mountain and was plummeting towards them. They would be swept from the side of the mountain within the space of a heartbeat.

Treguard's survival instincts kicked in as the group stared up at their impending doom. He looked round quickly and saw what he sought, a narrow declivity between two rocks. The beginnings of a cave? Treguard seized Dugald's arm and dragged him towards it, their horses bolting back down the

path. They didn't have time to regret the loss of their saddle-bags for, just as they reached the entrance of the cave, the avalanche crashed down on to the path. Thin screams told them that their attackers were swept over the edge of the precipice to their doom. The impact of the falling snow shook their bodies. Then everything was quiet, and once more they could hear the moaning of the wind – but more distantly now, as if it came from beyond a barrier of ice.

Their eyes gradually became accustomed to the near darkness, and they could see that the mouth of the cave was blocked by a heavy fall of snow. Nothing of what lay behind them in the cave could be made out at all, as the thin light of dusk failed to penetrate more than a few feet beyond the snow-fall.

'I think I still have my tinderbox,' muttered Dugald.

His words echoed back like a ghost's from some far recess of the cave. Treguard heard him rummaging at his belt, and then the rasp of flint on steel. Sparks flew from the tinderbox on to a piece of oil-soaked rag which sputtered into flame. Dugald held up the smouldering rag, casting great shadows of himself on to the cavern walls. The chamber was much bigger than Treguard had imagined it was going to be, opening up behind them into a vast expanse. Dripping stalactites hung down like ragged prehistoric teeth from the invisible ceiling. The light grew stronger as Dugald lit one of the few remaining torches at his belt with the rag, and the eerie shadows settled as it burnt with a steady flame. Both of them could now see all too clearly that the cave entrance was blocked with tons of snow. It would take them

days to clear it, even if they had had any tools.

Dugald tried to put a good complexion on matters. 'This time, my lord, it is I who owe my life to you. Any debt is repaid.'

'Ah, Dugald, there are no debts between friends,' replied Treguard as cheerfully as he could. In reality his heart was heavy. The only exit was blocked and the forbidding depths of the cave filled him with a sense of unease. Another man might put such feelings down to superstitious dread, but Treguard had an affinity for these things. He knew the scent of magic.

Perhaps Dugald sensed it too. His voice quavered slightly as he said, 'Hadn't we better explore a little way?' Treguard nodded. Together they walked towards the interior of the cavern, Dugald holding the torch in front of them to light the way.

'Look!' Dugald had stopped and was pointing at some ancient paintings on one of the cavern walls. They were crudely executed pictures of soldiers in exotic battle-harness, some mounted on monstrous animals with threatening fangs and long, hooked noses. Treguard finally recognized the animals to be elephants, although he had only seen one once. It had escaped from the Emperor's zoo during the burning of Constantinople. He could still remember its terrifying bellows as, bowling over anyone or anything in its way, it had blundered about the streets, maddened by the fires.

'What are they?' whispered Dugald in a hushed voice.

Treguard had already worked out the only explanation of the painting's existence. 'Hannibal's army.'

Dugald shook his head in bafflement. Unlike Treguard, he was not a well-read man.

'Legend has it,' went on Treguard, 'that a great Carthaginian general called Hannibal led an army across the Alps to sack Rome in the Golden Age. The great beasts shown here are elephants, on which his knights rode and fought.'

Dugald stared with renewed interest at the paintings. They came from an ancient time which he had heard about only in song. He followed Treguard in a daze, staring as more and more of the paintings appeared in the torchlight. The walls further in seemed to have been smoothed by human hand, and here and there they glimpsed in the shadows huge brick arches and vast side chambers, seemingly the work of giants. Ancient verdigris-stained suits of armour and weapons leant against the walls where they had been abandoned centuries before.

The main passage ended at an even larger arch, and the way past it was blocked by an enormous boulder of grey ice. However, they were heartened to find wood here: a number of old travelling chests stacked to one side of the chamber. The wood was dried out with age, and caught light immediately when Dugald bundled it into a fire and held the torch to it. Welcome warmth spread through their limbs and gradually thawed the chill as they stood in front of it, watching the firelight send shadows capering across their eerie surroundings.

They ate the last of the bread for supper, their conversation scant as they realized that, unless they could find another way out of the cave, this could be their last meal ever. Soon their eyelids began to droop with weariness; it had been a hard and energy-sapping day.

'We'd better get some sleep,' said Treguard.

'Tomorrow we can see about finding some way out of here.'

'What about the fire?' Dugald replied drowsily. '... Mustn't let it burn down ... We'd freeze to death ...'

'I'll keep an eye on it,' Treguard said; but Dugald was already asleep.

Treguard curled in front of the fire, wrapping himself in his cloak. Glancing at the flames, he estimated how long it would be before he needed to put on fresh wood; he could afford a couple of hours' sleep, at least. Before he quite dozed off, Treguard noticed that a crack had appeared in the grey block of ice obstructing the archway. A small rivulet of water was trickling away from it as it slowly melted in the heat of the fire. Maybe there was another exit through the arch, he thought, trying to struggle to his feet, but it was as if he had been enchanted; his eyes kept closing, and his body refused to respond to his brain's commands. He finally gave up the struggle and fell back into a nightmare-haunted sleep.

A voice awoke him. At first he thought it was from his dream: the dead children outside had dug their way through the snow into the chamber. They had seemed to stand around him, sharpening carving knives on the cavern walls, their voices echoing weirdly . . .

But now he was awake, he realized there *had* been a voice. But, where the ghosts' voices in his dream had been high and clear, this one was a gruff baritone. Treguard opened his eyes a crack. A monstrous shadow cast by a figure standing in front

of the fire played on the cavern ceiling. A cold thrill of adrenalin ran through Treguard's veins, and he reached for Wyrmslayer lying by his side. Was this one of the mountain giants of legend that fed upon the bones of men? He edged his feet under him silently, ready to rise in a crouch. His eyes travelled down to the source of the shadows. Then he gasped, mere amazement momentarily banishing any thought of battle.

A squat figure stood by the fire. He was not even four feet tall, but there was the impression of great strength in his small frame – particularly in his upper body, which might have been moulded out of rock. His appearance was gnarled and gnome-like, with a fierce leonine face and large pointed ears that wagged as he muttered to himself. The dwarf's clothing was even stranger: an antique tabard made from interleaved leather pieces, and an oversized helmet which fell at a ridiculous angle over his broad brow. Treguard recognized both the armour and the helmet as being similar to that worn by the soldiers in the cave paintings. Although his accent was strange, Treguard began piecing together what the dwarf was muttering to himself.

'Two snoring knights in my hall, eh?' The little man rubbed his swart hands together and danced over to where Dugald's cloth held the last fragments of their food. He sniffed the air excitedly over it. 'And what have the fine gentlemen left Elshander for his supper?' He opened up the bundle and snorted in disgust. 'Tcha! Not enough to feed a mouse! Well, this will not do. Elshander has been trapped in that ice for – how long has it been? Fifteen hundred years? Now he is hungry. The worst thing is to

escape and find only crumbs to eat.' He looked over at the recumbent knights slyly. 'Elshander likes meat, and the knights look to be firm of thew; no need to go hungry, then . . .

'Flesh is flesh; meat is meat.'

'Human or elephant, I must eat.'

The dwarf smirked at his little ditty. Then his expression became serious again; he drew the carving knife from his belt – the same, as like as not, that Treguard had heard being scraped against the wall in his dream. He crept towards Treguard purposefully, the knife outstretched to carve. 'Oh yes,' he whispered through wet lips, 'a fine-thewed warrior, roasted over the fire; it will taste better than a partridge or a quail. Elshander will feast tonight!'

'If eat you must, then eat sword, dwarf!' Treguard said. He had been crouching, coiled like a spring ready to erupt into action. Now he shot to his feet, towering above the dwarf, who gave a guttural cry and leapt back in surprise as the tip of Wyrmslayer quivered at his throat.

'Master!' he exclaimed, his beady eyes fixed anxiously on the sword-point. 'You wake! What a pleasant surprise. I was only about to tuck your cloak closer around you.'

'And I suppose the doggerel I heard was a lullaby, eh?' Treguard growled. Dugald was stirring now, woken by the voices. Treguard nodded towards him without taking his eyes from the dwarf. 'My comrade and I are partial to a bit of meat ourselves, and no more choosy than you where it comes from right at the moment – so let's have your story, little trollkin, and make it a good one if you don't fancy becoming a spit roast.'

Elshander pranced in front of the sword in agitation. 'Oh, master, don't take on so! Elshander is your friend. Hannibal's friend as well, the great general, though you wouldn't think it the way he imprisoned me in that ice block . . . but that is another story. Elshander forgives; Elshander understands that Hannibal didn't like the idea of his best elephant being eaten. Yes, gentlemen, Elshander's stomach is his one weakness. Why, did I not offer to help Hannibal get through the Alps? Long ages ago, with my brethren I built caves like this, and tunnels that went through the mountains – the subterranean Halls of Alptrum. So the Romans were surprised; Hannibal was on them like a wolf into a sheepfold. And Elshander, was he happy? Ecstatic! I'd hidden one of the elephants away in a side cavern, see? Enough to feed me for a twelvemonth. But General Hannibal found me out, so thus I ended up in a block of ice, dreaming of wine and succulent roast meat all these years.'

Treguard's eyes had wandered to the pool of water which had formed from the melted ice block as the dwarf had been talking. He could now see a passageway leading away into the darkness behind it. 'You said something about tunnels through the mountains?'

The tip of Wyrmslayer toyed with the leather tassles at the dwarf's throat; he gulped nervously. 'Yes indeed, master. That very tunnel there leads right through to the south. Perhaps if you forbear from killing me, sire, I could lead you through it.'

'Perhaps . . . and perhaps not.' Treguard turned enquiringly to Dugald. The younger man nodded his head, agreeing with the plan. The dwarf seemed like the only chance they had of getting out of the cave

alive, but they didn't want to reveal the weakness of their position yet. Dugald started picking up the few possessions they had saved from the avalanche.

When he was ready, Treguard prodded Elshander towards the archway. The dwarf didn't wait for another invitation, but hopped through the opening having grabbed a brand from the fire. Treguard and Dugald followed. Guarded all the time by the two watchful knights, he led them down a steep rock-hewn tunnel. There followed a dizzying succession of passages and caverns which left the two of them completely disoriented after but half an hour's journey. The dwarf kept up an unrelenting pace, leading them ever deeper into the heart of the mountain. The chill of the outer cavern was gradually replaced by a warmth and then a palpable heat which seemed to seep up from the depths of the earth itself. Soon both Treguard and Dugald were sweating heavily. A sense of foreboding hung over the silent corridors, and their feet kicked up the dust of ages.

They were not reassured to come across a pile of bones still clad in antique armour lying across their path.

'Stragglers from Hannibal's army,' explained Elshander. 'Wandered about in circles until the Shadows got them.'

'What are the Shadows?' asked Dugald nervously.

'Oh, don't worry; as long as you're with Elshander they won't trouble you. They are the ghosts of my forebears, remaining here after death to watch over our treasure hoards. Treasure is a dwarf's only weakness.'

Indeed, as they spoke they had entered a high

arched chamber. Treguard and Dugald stopped in amazement. Huge coffers overflowing with gold coins, precious gems and silks, rich burnished armour, dazzling mirrors and exquisite furniture were piled up to the ceiling. Neither of them had conceived there could be such wealth in the world, far less that it could be contained in one room such as this. But in front of the treasure, wispy half-formed wraiths floated, their arms outstretched as if daring them to steal from the dwarven hoard.

As they stood gazing in awe, Elshander walked to the glittering pile. The wraiths parted like a thin gossamer curtain in front of him and he climbed right to the summit of the teetering mound of treasure. First he reached over to a book, and laid his hand flat on its opened pages. A golden glow spread from its pages to the palm of his hand, and then all over his body. As abruptly as it had begun, the glow diminished, and when he took his hand away from it, Treguard saw that, where there had been writing before, the pages were now blank. The dwarf looked down at them, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

'Now I know you. Lord Dunshelm and Sir Dugald, that's what you're called. You are travelling to the east; you're looking for someone.'

'How do you know all that?' Treguard demanded.

'From the *Book of Secrets* I have just read; Mercury gave it to the dwarves after we fashioned his flying sandals for him. It contains half of every secret there will ever be, so nothing can be hidden from the brethren for long.'

'Look in it and learn where we'll find the one we seek,' Dugald told him.

Elshander grinned and spread his gnarled hands

helplessly. 'Ah, would that I could, young sire. But Mercury warned us never to turn the pages; he cautioned that looking into the future brought death. That's why I'm the last dwarf alive and all the others have become phantoms. Secrets, alas, are the one thing that dwarves cannot resist . . .'

He began climbing down the pile of treasure, picking up a cloak lying across a chest as he did so.

'What are you doing now?' growled Treguard suspiciously.

'Just getting a cloak to warm me, master.'

'Warm you?' Treguard wiped his brow. 'I'd have thought it was hot enough already without a cloak.'

'And it will get hotter yet, fine lord,' Elshander said, exiting through the whirling cordon of wraiths. 'Follow me to Italy!' he cried suddenly, prancing off down the passage.

Soon, as the dwarf had predicted, it became unbearably hot in the tunnel, and their vision was obscured by thick steam issuing from fissures in the rock. In the distance they could see an opening into a wide cavern, bathed in a deep red glow issuing from a huge pit at its centre. A narrow pathway on a ledge looped around to the only exit. As they watched, there was a minor tremor, and a gout of molten lava sluiced out of the tunnel wall and surged menacingly towards them. Treguard began to feel his hair singe in the heat. He looked at Elshander, wondering how they were going to get across this obstacle. To his amazement, the dwarf strolled casually to the burning stream of lava, and knelt down in front of it.

'If Elshander can't eat, at least he can drink!' he said with glee, placing his lips to the advancing flow as travellers might stoop to drink from a clear

mountain stream. With a huge sucking sound, the dwarf began slurping up the liquid. Within a few seconds all of the hundreds of gallons of lava had been sucked away!

Elshander stood, wiping his lips. His belly was distended, but only like a man who had drunk too much ale. 'That's better!' he exclaimed, letting out a belch which sent a gout of steam hurtling down the tunnel.

He led them up the passageway to the thin ledge around the molten pit. Looking down, Treguard could see a pulsing core of lava thousands of feet below. Elshander didn't favour the awesome sight with so much as a second glance, but strolled indifferently across the narrow ledge to the other side. The two warriors were more cautious, flattening their backs to the cavern wall as they edged along it. When they were halfway across, a mighty roar from below sent a shower of rocks spinning off the cavern walls and from around their feet. They clung on for dear life as the tremor subsided. Elshander hopped with delight from the safety of the other end of the ledge.

'Don't worry, good sirs, it is only the dragon that dreams beneath the earth. He's turning in his sleep; his time has not yet come – not until all the dwarves are dead will he rise and pull down the Halls of Alptrum, so that the mountains tremble and fall.'

Treguard strode on to the end of the ledge. 'Indeed!' he snorted. 'Do you take us for credulous fools? I very much doubt that the world-serpent would wake just because some mishap accounted for the last living dwarf. And you can be damned sure

that I won't let the possibility stay my hand, if you try anything treacherous.'

'Come, come, master; this is not the time for threats. We're nearly there!'

What remained of the night was taken up with more winding corridors, then a series of interminable steps that snaked upwards through dank fissures of rock. Finally they felt the breath of fresh air, and turning a corner they saw a distant circle of silver: the first light of an Alpine dawn shining from a cave mouth at the end of the tunnel.

Treguard and Dugald hurried towards the light, bursting from it on to a green hillside. The hills and forests of northern Italy stretched below them in a majestic panorama. Even better, a wayside inn, its sign waving welcomingly in the early morning breeze, could be seen further down the valley. The smells of baking that wafted up the valley promised a good breakfast.

'Well, dwarf, you've kept your side of the bargain . . .' Dugald said, turning to face Elshander. To his surprise, the little creature had completely disappeared though he had been standing by his elbow but a second before.

'Elshander! Where are you, you cursed fay?' Treguard roared.

'Right here, esteemed master!' A voice behind Treguard's shoulder made him jump in surprise. He whirled around and was met with a view of the empty hillside. Treguard looked at Dugald who stared back at him in confusion. After a moment, there was a rustle of unfurling cloth and Elshander became visible, stepping out from the folds of the cloak he had taken from the treasure

chamber. His face beamed with amusement.

'Surprised you, did I, gentlemen? A cloak of invisibility – very precious for we small folk, seeing as how the larger races don't like us much. It also keeps the cold out, as well as prying eyes.' His face now became serious again. 'Besides, it will be useful in our travels.'

'Travels?' repeated Treguard. 'What travels? You've shown us out of the caves, you can go free now. If it's money you want, take these coins in recompense.'

'Coins? Coins? What does Elshander want with coins? Don't you have eyes to see? Didn't you see the treasure hoards in the caves? They would buy a duchy or a kingdom. No, sirs, coins are not what I want.'

'So, what *do* you want?'

'Oh sweet lord, what I desire and have lacked these fifteen hundred years.'

'And what's that?'

'Why, sire, elephant meat!'

'How do you know that we're going anywhere near any elephants?' Treguard said in exasperation.

'Why, gentle master, the book told me that you travel to the east. There is a home of elephants in the east, so I heard from my cousin – in a mighty mountain range near the lands of the Khans. There I'll feast on elephant every night, and old Hannibal can spin in his grave!'

Treguard sighed with exasperation. The dwarf seemed intent on coming with them and, with the cloak of invisibility, he could trail along behind them whether they wanted him to or not . . .

'All right, then,' he grunted. 'Let's get some breakfast.'

Together the three of them – two human knights who could be seen, and one sly dwarf who fortunately could not – made their way down the steep hillside to the inn.

CHAPTER THREE

Treguard and Dugald stared up at the sign hanging from a stanchion over their heads. *Abraham ben-Levi, Importer of Precious Goods from the Orient*, it read.

The two men looked at one another wearily. For two days now they had made their way through the bustling streets of Genoa seeking a ship that would give them passage to the Holy Land. At each of the merchant's halls they had made their enquiries, only to be turned away politely but firmly. Since the Crusades, when destitute knights had got a bad name for defaulting on payment, all the merchants' guilds had been reluctant to extend credit or favours, insisting on cash in advance. The two travellers had barely enough money to buy them shelter for the night, far less berths on an eastbound ship.

The last merchant they had talked to had declined their request like all the others, but he directed them here, to this house in a garbage-filled alley by the docks. It was hardly a salubrious area; buildings overhung the streets, casting a deep shadow, and the stench from the open sewer running down the middle of the street was particularly rank in the oppressive late autumn heat wave that hung over the city. Both of them felt queasy from the combination of the stench and their hunger. Neither took much hope of finding help here. However, the name on the sign

tallied with the name that they had been given. And this was their last chance.

Treguard was just about to hammer the brass knocker on the door when a sudden disturbance made him turn round. A stout street vendor, his tray of pastries still hanging around his neck by colourful tassles, had a young urchin by the ear with one hand and was belabouring him with the other.

'Caught you stealing, eh, Lorenzo?' he bellowed as he struck the boy again. 'It's no use denying it! I felt you sneak up behind me and grab one of the cakes. Where is it, then?'

The boy protested his innocence, but the pastry-seller was in no mood to listen. He now tried to upend the child, hoping thereby to shake the hidden pastry loose. Unfortunately, as he did so, his remaining cakes fell from the tray on to the dirty street, further enraging him.

The two knights looked at one another in exasperation. Scenes like this had been commonplace on their journey ever since Elshander had become an unwanted part of their group. The dwarf's cloak of invisibility had allowed him to play merry hell on merchants and peasants, soldiers and priests alike. Purses, pastries, strings of sausages, silken handkerchiefs, precious stones, silver censers: all had been snatched from their rightful owners during the course of their travels. Since the true thief, Elshander, was always invisible, it was inevitably some innocent bystander like the boy who got the blame. Treguard and Dugald had spent quite a bit of their diminishing funds bribing magistrates into releasing people who otherwise might have ended unfairly in gaol because of Elshander's villainy.

Enough was enough, thought Treguard; this time he was going to have more than harsh words with the dwarf.

'Elshander!' he hissed into the shadows. 'Where are you?'

'Why, right here, tranquil lord.' Elshander's voice, muffled by a mouthful of pastry, came from right beside Treguard. As usual he jumped in surprise.

'Haven't I told you what I'm going to do to you if you keep sneaking up on me like that?' Treguard snarled.

'Many times, master of mercy, and haven't I always ignored you?' Elshander replied superciliously.

'By the Holy Mother of God, if I ever catch you stealing again, that will be the end of you – even if you are the last dwarf left alive and the mountains collapse, or whatever else they're meant to do when that oh-so-regrettable event occurs.'

'Threats don't become you, Treguard. Besides I'm sure you would have stolen the cake if *you'd* been invisible.'

The little dwarf was incorrigible. Twice, on the journey to Genoa, Treguard and Dugald had risen before dawn to sneak out of inns in which they'd been staying, hoping to leave Elshander behind. And both times, as they had hurried south, casting anxious glances behind them and listening intently for the dwarf's footsteps on the road, they had been confident that they'd lost him. The first time, a farmer's cart had passed them at midday. There had been an ominous rustling of straw at the back of the cart, and two small crooked footprints appeared in

the dust by the cart's tailgate. The second time, the sack of provisions that Treguard had obtained had seemed unexpectedly heavy as they sneaked out of the inn. It was only when they reached their destination at the end of the day that Elshander thought to reveal that he'd been hidden in the sack all along. That night, as he heard the dwarf's peaceful snores from his bed in their shared room, Treguard had been tempted to drop something large on the invisible little creature. Unfortunately, when he had tried to lever himself out of bed, he found that the muscles of his back had seized up from the heavy load he'd been carrying all day. He had sunk back on to his bed with the same snarl of frustration that he now felt welling up in his throat.

The vendor was still shaking the boy by the ear, threatening to remove it from his head. Treguard could guess where this was leading; the commotion would soon attract the town guard, and the boy would be arrested. He went over to the man, drawing his near-empty purse from his belt.

'Here, take these coppers; they should recompense you for your goods,' he said, thrusting the money at the man. The vendor immediately released the boy when he saw Treguard's menacing bulk looming over him. The boy scampered off down the alley holding his bruised ear.

'Very good of you, sir,' said the vendor, touching his knuckle to his forehead. He gathered his cakes from the filthy cobbles of the street, giving them a perfunctory brush as he replaced them in his tray. He was obviously not one to let a little muck spoil his wares. Treguard wondered whether the cake Elshander had eaten had been as dirty as these. Even if so, it

was unlikely to harm the dwarf's ox-like constitution – more the pity.

He walked back to Dugald and discovered that the door of the merchant's house was now open. His young companion was talking to a long thin man of middle years. The man had obviously seen better days; his robe was threadbare, and his complexion sallow from a combination of bad diet and too many hours spent poring over ledgers. He turned to Treguard as he walked up.

'You acted very admirably just then, sir knight,' said the man. 'I was just telling your young friend that it is not often we see acts of charity here in the Via Lachrymosae. My name is Abraham ben-Levi, merchant of silk, silver, spices from the east. This,' he said, indicating the building, 'is my home. Won't you honour me by joining me in some refreshment?'

Treguard was immediately taken with the man's friendly manners. He accepted Abraham's invitation, and together they entered the house. The cool of the tiled hallway was welcome after the oppressive heat in the alleyway, and a sweet aroma of sandalwood masked the street-smells. Abraham shut the door behind him. With a sinking heart, Treguard noticed a pot plant at the side of the hall swaying as if under its own volition; Elshander had obviously entered with them. Well, if the accursed dwarf was going to jeopardize a passage to the east by pilfering from the merchant's house, he would make sure he suffered for it . . .

Abraham led them into a reception room. It was sparsely furnished: a faded rag of tapestry hung from one wall, and the carpet was scuffed threadbare. It

had none of the opulence of the other merchants' houses they had been in.

Abraham noticed the look on their faces. 'I apologize for the state of the house; these have been hard times of late. These are practically the only things I have left which haven't gone to the pawn-brokers. Perhaps you might be interested in buying something . . . ?' He gestured at the carpet and the tapestry.

'I'm sorry to disappoint you,' Treguard said apologetically. 'Perhaps we have come here under false pretences, but my friend and I are seeking passage to Outremer. A merchant directed us to your house.'

Abraham smiled wryly. 'I wish I was in a position to help you, but my finances are such that I'm thinking of selling up and going into another line of trade altogether.' He invited his guests to be seated before he went on.

'For years, trade with the east was good in spite of the Crusades. I brought silk and silver from as far away as Tashkent and Samarkand and sold them for a good price on the market here. But lately a number of merchants' caravans have been attacked in the Syrian desert. Unfortunately two of them were mine; I've had no goods to sell for the past year, and my creditors are pressuring me to repay money I borrowed in better times. No-one would lend me money to hire another ship to the east knowing that I had such large debts still outstanding.'

Treguard was impressed with the man's candour. 'I'm sorry to hear of your ill-fortune. Since Saladin's death, the east seems to have become as lawless as it is Godless.'

'Lawless . . . and a place of demons!' a voice said from behind them. They spun around to face the entrance of the room. A man dressed in filthy rags stood in the doorway, his tangled white hair hanging in limp tassels over his face. His back was bent in a painful arch, as if he were carrying some great burden. But strangest of all were his eyes; Dugald found it impossible to meet their gaze, and even Treguard shifted uneasily. For the man's eyes burnt with the fires of fanaticism and madness.

'An abode of demons,' he raved. 'Asmody, Moloc, Mammon and the Lord of Flies himself dwell there in those heathen lands. But worst was the one with blue eyes – a woman devil, she was, and dressed in the robes of Death! Queen Hel, they call her – and so does everyone else who comes to taste her steel.'

Abraham was obviously embarrassed by this intrusion. 'Forgive him,' he whispered to Treguard. 'He's quite mad – a fellow merchant with no kin. His brother was killed in the spring, when their caravan was attacked by robbers in the Syrian desert. The local authorities suspect the involvement of the *hashishiyyun* – the Assassins – but poor Giacomo claims it was just one lone attacker, and a woman at that! She must've been a veritable Amazon, because their guards were veteran Crusaders and she slew half a dozen of them – and apparently decapitated his brother right in front of Giacomo's eyes. Giacomo managed to escape by the skin of his teeth, although sometimes I think it might have been kinder if he'd died there also. For what kind of a life is this living hell of madness that grips him now?'

'A terrible story,' agreed Treguard. There was a sudden tug at his sleeve and he looked up to find

Giacomo standing right over him. His intense stare discomfited Treguard, and he was just about to break the man's grip when Giacomo spoke again.

'You're English, aren't you? Well, tell me the answer to this riddle, then: Queen Hel, she who killed my brother and my guards, she had a sword – the sword of the Coeur de Lion.'

'What are you saying?' snapped Treguard. Despite his irritation, his attention was now totally focused on the madman's words.

'Why, man, where have you been living all your life? I'm talking about the sword of Richard of England! My poor brother bought it from a shady character in Hamadan; the merchant told him it had been taken from the Fortress of Alamut, the Assassins' castle. Queen Hel wanted it back. She followed us across the desert . . . killed everyone except me. I saw her lift it up; the hilt had a lion's head with amethyst eyes. It was a beautiful piece of work, worth a king's ransom. She called it the sword of Malek Ric.'

Malek Ric; it was the Arabs' name for Richard, whose colossal frame and red-gold hair had made him seem to them like a ferocious angel. Despite the man's obvious madness, there seemed a core of truth to what he was saying. If the king's sword *had* been kept at Alamut, then maybe Richard's heir had been as well. The Assassins were known to have plotted against the Sultan – might they not have kidnapped the child after Saladin's death? Treguard turned to Dugald excitedly.

'The fortress of Alamut! Everything points to the heir being there!'

Dugald's face shone with the same excitement.

'Yes! That's why they wanted the sword back! If they were ever going to ransom him – as they might once King John is dead – they would send the sword as proof they had him. But . . .'

'But what?'

'This blue-eyed warrioress. Where does she come into it?'

Treguard shrugged. 'Who's to say she was even real? This man has been through an ordeal that shattered his mind; his recollection of the incident is apt to be embellished by fancies. First and foremost, we're going to have to get a ship to Outremer. At last we have a definite clue!'

As he said these words, though, despondency crept back into Treguard's mind. They might now have an idea where the heir was being kept, but they still lacked the funds to take them there. A heavy silence filled the room as Treguard and Dugald contemplated anew their most pressing problem.

They had forgotten Giacomo in the excitement. His voice cut in upon their reverie. 'Beware! Those who seek the sword will find only Death!' he shouted, his grip tightening on Treguard's arm.

'No, you are wrong, man,' said Treguard quietly. 'It is I who seek Death out, and have done ever since we began the search for Richard's heir. Anyone who dares oppose me will taste the good steel of my sword here, for nothing's going to stop me now!'

'Apart from a few pieces of gold, awesome lord . . .' Elshander's disembodied voice came from the centre of the room. Giacomo and Abraham jumped up in surprise and looked around wildly. To them, the former's talk of demons suddenly seemed horribly real; an invisible creature had spoken. As

they watched, their worst fears seemed confirmed. Objects began raining down on to the mouldy carpet as if from an invisible door: silver cups, brooches, coins, silk scarves, gems – even a half-eaten sausage.

'As you can see, my pilfering has not been in vain,' said the dwarf, unfurling his cloak with a dramatic swoosh and stepping out in front of the merchant's horrified eyes.

'Aiee! A devil! A devil!' screamed Giacomo, flattening himself against the wall, his limbs trembling like leaves. Abraham started backing away towards the door, his eyes fixed in disbelief upon Elshander's misshapen figure.

'Don't alarm yourselves, good townsfolk,' the dwarf said, amused by their fright, 'Elshander is my name, and like these two gentlemen I've business in the east. Now, as I understand it, the problem is lack of funds. You're a merchant,' he said, pointing to the trembling Abraham, 'you'll be able to tell us if this is enough to pay for our passage.'

'More than enough,' said Abraham, staring vacantly at the heap of treasure, then back at the dwarf.

'Good.' Elshander snatched up the sausage and started to chew it. 'Then you can sell what you need for the passage, and give me back the rest.'

'Wait,' demanded Treguard angrily. 'Where did you get all these things? If they're stolen goods, Elshander . . .'

'Tsk, tsk, such a temper! Let's just say some kind townspeople have contributed to our expenses along the way. Now all we have to do is get this fine fellow here,' he nodded at Abraham, 'to negotiate our passage. He can have a cut of the goods as well,

seeing as how he could act as our guide in Outremer.'

Teguard restrained himself from throttling Elshander. They might be stolen goods, but there was no way of getting them back to their rightful owners now — and where else could they hope to secure the required funds?

As for Abraham, aside from his obvious terror at the dwarf's outlandish appearance, he considered the proposition a good one. With the little capital he had left and what he could earn as a guide, he would be able to buy some silks which he could sell at a premium on the Genoese market. He made his mind up rapidly. 'I'll go down to the docks immediately,' he said, picking up the items on the carpet. 'Giacomo can come with me.'

They turned to where Giacomo had been standing, only to find him gone. The sight of the dwarf had been too much for him to bear. Outside, they heard his running footsteps and excited shouts as he tried to attract the attention of the neighbours.

'I must go and get him before he stirs up some mischief,' said Abraham; but it was already too late. Despite the Genoese people's general lack of interest in others' business — as witnessed by the scene with the pastry vendor earlier — Giacomo's shouts of 'demon' and 'devil' had already attracted an unhealthily large crowd outside Abraham's door.

'What's this — devil-worship in the Jew's house?' they heard a voice ask.

'Aye. This white-haired gentleman here says that ben-Levi conjured a hideous dwarf from empty air.'

'Who are they calling hideous?' growled Elshander inside the house, bristling at the insult.

'A dwarfish figure you say? Surely it must be Beelzebub himself he has summoned!'

'Beelzebub, Moloch, Mammon . . . they are as nothing beside their terrible dam, Queen Hel!' they heard Giacomo shouting.

'Burn the house! Burn the house!' the mob yelled in response. The leaden window panes immediately disintegrated as cobblestones prised from the street were hurled through them.

'I'll show them who's hideous!' said Elshander, striding purposefully to the door. Just then it was flung open, flattening him painfully behind it. A crowd of rioters had burst through the open front door and were crowding the hallway. Burning torches underlit their faces, giving them a devilish appearance.

'Kill the Jewish sorcerer!' someone at the back screamed, and the bolder ones at the front inched forward, daggers and cudgels clutched in their hands. Their ardour was dimmed by the sight of the gleaming swords that Teguard and Dugald had now drawn. They stood protectively in front of Abraham.

'Stand back or, by God, I'll make widows of the wives of all men here!' shouted Teguard.

The first rank of the rioters wavered, cowed by his imposing figure and warlike demeanour; but the people behind couldn't see what they could, and surged forward. The three of them would have been crushed to death in the small room, if not beaten to death first, had not Abraham at that moment tugged a bell-pull on the wall next to him. Immediately the floor gave way under the mouldy carpet on which he and the two knights stood, and they found themselves tumbling down a steeply sloping chute into utter darkness.

'What's happening?' screamed Dugald.

'An escape route that my grandfather installed in the house!' shouted Abraham. 'Hold on!'

There was an almighty splash, and they were floundering in a rank-smelling sewer far underneath the house. Spitting out foul water, they heaved themselves up on to a walkway running alongside the channel.

'A neat, if somewhat unpleasant, mode of egress,' remarked Dugald, wringing out his clothes as best he could.

Treguard nodded. 'And rather reminiscent of my castle dungeons, I must say.'

A long way above them they could hear the rioters debating whether they should give chase, but so far none seemed anxious to plunge down the chute.

'What happens now?' asked Dugald.

'Now they'll burn the house, and with it the last of my family's worldly goods,' Abraham replied grimly.

'Then we must stop them!'

'No.' Abraham hung his head wearily. 'Persecution such as you've just witnessed doesn't go away overnight. Even if we should drive these men off, others would come when I'm least expecting them. Then I'd be lucky to escape with my life. Come, I have most of the dwarf's goods – let's find a way out of here and get to the docks.'

Treguard suddenly remembered Elshander. The last he'd seen of him was when a door had crushed him against the wall. He felt a momentary stab of guilt; it wasn't in his knightly code to leave a companion behind during a fight, even if that companion was a creature of faerie. Unfortunately there wasn't much they could do for him now. With a heavy heart, Treguard followed Abraham and

Dugald down the side of the sewer. Rats scurried away from beneath their feet as they slipped and slid, but presently they came to the stairs leading up to a piazza that fronted Genoa's bustling harbour area. The three of them squelched towards a ship moored amongst the Venetian galleys, Arab feluccas, and English brigs at the quayside. Their filthy appearance drew contemptuous glances from passersby.

'This is the ship of an acquaintance, Theodore of Tarsus,' explained Abraham. 'He is sailing with the tide for Tortosa in Outremer.' They mounted the gangplank, and Abraham entered into negotiations with Theodore.

Treguard cast nervous glances behind them at the town. A thick pall of smoke hung over the street where Abraham's house had been. The mob had obviously wasted no time in burning it down but, judging by the size of the cloud of smoke, the fire had now spread to more of the combustible wooden houses that thronged the streets; the whole neighbourhood was ablaze. Soon townspeople were running to the water's edge with pails and any other empty vessels they could get their hands on. Treguard nodded in grim satisfaction; it was an appropriate reward for the citizens' intolerance.

Abraham returned to his companions, having finished his haggling, and they watched as the sailors prepared to pull up the gangplank.

'Poor Elshander. In a way I'm almost going to miss having him around,' Dugald said.

'I'm afraid you're not,' Treguard replied, pointing at the gangplank. Wet footprints were appearing on it as if by magic even as the sailors pulled it in. They leapt back in surprise as something invisible brushed

past them. There was a soft thunk as Elshander dropped to the deck.

'Cast off, captain!' a disembodied voice shouted cheerfully. 'The last passenger is aboard!'

Treguard could only raise his eyes to the heavens. The sea journey ahead of them was not going to be uneventful, to say the least.

CHAPTER FOUR

Fair winds had brought Theodore's ship to the shores of Outremer earlier than Treguard could have hoped for. The port of Tortosa lay ahead, its whitewashed houses and swaying palm trees bathed in the heat of the fierce Levantine sun. Arab dhows thronged the harbour quayside, off-loading sacks of colourful fruit and bales of silk. The offshore breeze brought with it the dry dusty smell of the desert which stretched away inland from the town. Theodore and his crew were busy readying the ship for docking, Dugald and Abraham had gone down to their cabins to collect their gear, so there was nothing for Treguard to do apart from enjoy the scene and the sunshine.

Outremer . . . he thought; *the Holy Land*. Eight years ago he had hoped to travel here. Instead the soldiers of the Crusade had got only halfway to their destination, sacking the Christian city of Constantinople. Treguard still remembered those days with shame. Maybe now he would have the chance to atone for what had happened there. In his mind he traced the journey they would take to the Fortress of Alamut now they were in Outremer: first into the mountains to the Krak des Chevaliers, headquarters of the Hospitaller Knights. From there they would ride northeast, through Mohammadan territory to

the edge of the Caspian Sea, and Alamut. There stood the Fortress of Death, as Alamut was known in the Christian world, and there too their goal awaited them – Richard's long-lost heir. Treguard suddenly felt a stirring in his blood at the prospect of the impending mission. He closed his eyes in contentment, breathing in the mingled scent of salt sea and desert air . . .

'Treguard . . .' Dugald had come up the companionway with Abraham while the Saxon had been lost in his reverie.

'Yes?' he turned, smiling at his young companion.

'I think we might have a problem.'

'It's Elshander . . .' put in Abraham. 'He's barely conscious, and he won't leave the hold.'

Treguard sighed, the contentment of a moment before evaporating. The dwarf had disgraced himself throughout the voyage. Shortly after they left Genoa he had discovered the cargo of Tuscan wine in the hold, and had spent the rest of the journey drinking his way through it. No threat or blandishment could move him out of there, and he would probably have been forgotten by everyone had it not been for the tuneless drinking songs that had disturbed their sleep during the still nights of the passage. All of the sailors had come to think the hold was haunted, and nightly prayed for deliverance.

'By Heaven!' Treguard cursed. 'That's all we need. I'd best go and prise the accursed tyke away from his tipple.'

A belch cannoned from an empty space on the deck behind them. 'No need for that!' Elshander's familiar voice called ebulliently. 'Here I am, at your shervice; jush let me stopper thish flagon.'

Well, Treguard reflected, at least the dwarf was still conscious, and the fact that he had climbed the ladder from the hold unaided meant that he might conceivably avoid falling headlong into the water when they docked. Meanwhile Elshander was cursing drunkenly; he seemed to be having a problem fitting the stopper into the neck of the flagon. As he struggled with this task his cloak gradually slipped from his shoulders, revealing his stunted figure. In one hand he held a flagon of wine, in the other the largest wooden stopper that Treguard had ever seen.

'Here, old friend, you can help with thish,' he said, proffering the flagon and stopper to the knight.

By this time the dwarf's antics had drawn a small audience of the ship's crew. They stared in stupefied disbelief at the capering, now-visible figure.

'Sweet Jesus protect us!' gasped one man. "'Tis a demon!'

Crossing themselves, the sailors began to back away in superstitious fear. It was left to the boatswain, a grizzled sea salt, to take a more pragmatic approach. 'Hey, let me look at that, you damned goblin,' he cried, snatching the stopper from Elshander's hand. He gazed at it in horror. 'By St Christopher's sandals, it's the plug for the bilge hole!'

'What's that?' Dugald asked.

The boatswain stared at him. 'Do you know nothing, man? It's where we let the water run out when we're in dry dock. It should never be removed when we're still at sea!'

As he said these words, the knot of onlookers dissolved into panic. Amid cries of 'abandon ship',

several of the sailors ran to the side and plunged into the harbour. Even from where they stood, Treguard and his companions could now hear the sea water pouring into the hold. The deck began to list beneath their feet. Treguard sent a look of murderous hatred at Elshander.

'Ish only a stopper,' the little man replied, eyeing Treguard and the angry boatswain nervously. The old sea salt took a furious swipe at him, but Elshander somehow managed to duck out of the way, running off up the deck clutching the flagon and his cloak. The boatswain momentarily thought of pursuing him then followed the remainder of the crew to the taffrail where they were yelling at passing small craft to come and rescue them.

Treguard could hardly believe what was happening. 'Come on,' he said wearily. 'We'd best see if we can reach Tortosa without getting our feet wet.'

Luckily, the crew's shouts had already persuaded several passing dhows to come alongside and they left the stricken ship as it began to founder.

'Theodore will have my blood for this,' Abraham said miserably, squatting amongst the cargo of oranges on the dhow's deck.

They looked back at where the ship was now waist deep in the water. With an audible sigh, its masts slipped beneath the surface of the sparkling Mediterranean. The sea belched once and some of the pallets containing the flagons of wine bobbed to the surface. Presently they heard a familiar voice break into song from a seemingly unmanned raft that drifted by, liberally heaped with wine bottles.

They reached the docks without further ado and were immediately confronted by an irate Theodore.

He had stumbled out of the dhow on reaching shore and was now soaking wet. Accompanying him were a number of the crew, including the boatswain; they had armed themselves with cudgels and belaying-pins.

'You have paupered me!' Theodore fairly screamed. 'Are you witless, Abraham? Is your head stuffed with cork instead of brains? What possessed you to bring a creature of the devil aboard my ship? The imp has brought about my ruin; but someone will pay, as God's my witness!'

Treguard set about trying to calm the man. 'You'll be recompensed,' he assured Theodore, opening his purse strings.

'That'll do just for a start!' The boatswain snatched the full purse out of his hands.

Treguard gave him a dangerous look, and touched the hilt of Wyrmsslayer in a gesture that made the sailors flinch back, but Abraham stepped in front of him.

'Come, let us calm ourselves,' he said. 'True, Theodore, we should have warned you that a faerie prankster had been haunting our party; the fault is mine. Will you take that purse and my promissory note? Fully half the profits from my trading venture will go straight to you.'

Theodore stroked his chin, venality replacing his rage. 'A not under-generous offer in the circumstances,' he conceded grudgingly. 'But I might have to wait some time before the note is of any worth – indeed, as I understand it there is no guarantee of profit. The principle is worth discussing, however, if you are prepared to agree to something more reasonable. A three-quarters share, shall we say?'

As they were still negotiating the details, Dugald drew Treguard to one side. ‘Surely I can contribute something to your losses?’ he asked.

‘With what, lad? You told me yourself that you had no money left in the world.’

Dugald looked away nervously. ‘I didn’t tell you everything about myself when we first met,’ he said. ‘Perhaps I should have, but I thought you might not let me travel with you if you knew my real motive. You’d have taken me for just a naive hero-worshipping young fool.’

Treguard studied him, brow furrowed in puzzlement. ‘Hardly, Dugald; you proved yourself admirably when you rode in against the dryad. But tell me now: what is this about?’

‘Aye,’ replied Dugald, meeting his gaze squarely, ‘it’s time for honesty. Do you recall the Nottingham Turney, which you attended seven years ago? Well, on that day my father was killed by a mysterious black knight, but his death was avenged by a bold Saxon warrior fresh back from the Crusade. I’m sure you remember my father, Treguard; Brian of Gascony was his name.’

Treguard stared in amazement. Now he realized why Dugald had seemed so familiar to him when they first talked in Freneville Forest. The young man resembled a much more youthful and thinner version of the man he had jostled against on that long-ago day in Nottingham. Sir Brian’s reputation at the joust had been legendary; he bested Treguard easily, but he could not hope to contend against the evil Gruagach’s unhuman champion. Treguard had avenged Sir Brian’s death in true knightly fashion. Now his rugged face creased into an

enormous smile and he hugged Dugald to him.

‘Your father was a brave man,’ he said, ‘and I am glad to have his son as my comrade on this quest. But tell me, Dugald, how can this help us pay off the debt?’

‘My brother is now the head of the family,’ Dugald explained. ‘And in view of the troublesome situation in France he has been making investments here in the Holy Land. I am certain we can draw a letter of credit from his business partners here – we can repay him when we return home.’

Treguard nodded. He had gold aplenty in the treasury at Dunshelm; after their quest was completed, he could pay back Dugald’s brother twice over. ‘Agreed. But let us not presume on your brother’s generosity more than we have to. I suggest we conclude this matter with Theodore, then seek out the cheapest lodgings that this town has to offer.’

The next morning dawned fair and bright and the three companions, having spent a restless night in a flea-ridden inn, were only too glad to set out on their journey into the mountains. They went on foot, and with barely any provisions, but Treguard hoped that their shortages would be made up by the Hospitallers when they reached the Krak des Chevaliers.

The landscape became more arid as they left the groves of citrus trees surrounding the town and climbed into the brown hills of the hinterland. As they climbed higher the sun began beating down on their heads in earnest. Sweat poured off their faces, and their scant possessions seemed to weigh ten times their actual bulk. All of them ruefully

of horses. At midday, it seemed as if some saint had heard their unspoken prayers: four riderless Arabian stallions appeared from the direction of Tortosa and began rapidly overtaking them. Their good cheer did not last for long, though – an all too-familiar and invisible voice hailed them from the lead horse.

'Hard work on foot, my friends? Hop up on one of these fine nags that Elshander has brought for you. Come, don't be shy, what's the point of walking when you can ride?'

The three companions trudged on in dead silence, ignoring the dwarf's repeated invitations and trying to act for all the world as if he didn't exist. Their silence didn't seem to deter Elshander, though, and their ears were assailed with his babble all through the rest of the long hot afternoon. Finally Elshander grew bored with their lack of response and rode off ahead, a merry song echoing back to them down the stony gully which they were ascending.

Suddenly, the dwarf's song was cut off in mid-sentence, and from around a bend ahead of them they heard a furious commotion. Drawing their weapons, they rushed forward – then stopped in their tracks. The dwarf was lying on his back in the dusty road, glaring up at a tall black-cloaked figure who stood over him on a rock. He was dangling the dwarf's cloak from one of his fingers as if it were a particularly dirty article of laundry. Treguard and his companions burst out laughing at the sight.

The stranger turned to face them as they rounded the bend in the trail. Not much of his face could be seen under the dark shadow cast by the hood of his habit, but Treguard fancied he could see a wan smile playing on the man's lips.

'Greetings,' the stranger called out. 'Is this little fellow with you? If so, my apologies for unseating him from his horse, but his coarse song disturbed me while I was meditating amongst the rocks. Perhaps, God forgive, I even lost my temper a little, though I am a holy man and slow to ire.'

'Understandable – he'd have driven Job himself into paroxysms of rage,' said Treguard. His tone was jovial, but something about the cowled figure disturbed him. 'Most people are unable to see him while he wears that cloak, however,' he went on.

'Nor could I,' replied the holy man. 'At first I was unnerved by the sight of what I took to be a singing horse. It was only when I scared it and the horse threw your dwarf that I found out about his sorcerous trick.' He indicated the cloak, which he now dropped on to Elshander as the dwarf tried to struggle to his feet. The little creature fell back on the ground with a thud, entangled in the folds of the garment.

'My name is Philip the Presbyter,' added the holy man. 'I wander the desert preaching the true faith to any benighted Saracen who will listen. Any priest can find his congregation in a Frankish town, after all, but is it not in the salvation of a heathen soul that God most rejoices?' For the first time, he seemed to notice the three men staring at his cowled face. 'You must forgive me for this hood. My face is not a pretty sight; my flesh was much chewed by leprosy before I came to the kingdom of God. Now He has cured me – a miracle, indeed, the saints be praised! But in the rare times I'm in the company of men, I prefer to cover my face in this way.'

Elshander had once more regained his feet. Dusting off his cloak, he wrapped it around his shoulders.

The invisibility covered him just in time to conceal the obscene gesture which he sullenly directed at the Presbyter.

Dugald was trying as best he could to hide the repugnance he felt at the mention of the man's disease, one of the most feared in all Christendom. 'Where are you headed?' he asked as neutrally as possible.

Philip nodded up the path. 'I was going to the Krak – where I assume you must be going as well, since this road leads nowhere else. The Hospitallers befriended me in spite of my misfortune, and after my recovery they all accounted it a great wonder and the clear evidence of God's mercy. In return for food and lodging, I bless their weapons so they may smite the Heathen with greater glory.'

Dugald glanced at his own weapon where it hung scabbarded at his side.

There was a flicker of a thin smile in the shadows of the cowl. 'Here, my friend,' said Philip, stepping off the rock to approach Dugald. 'It's a small thing to do, and your sword will be proof against the strongest blow.'

Before Dugald could object, Philip had somehow taken the sword from him and was muttering an incantation over it. Even Treguard blinked at the suddenness of the action; for a man once crippled by leprosy, this Presbyter moved with liquid grace. The blessing done, Dugald accepted the weapon back gingerly.

'Now, sir,' Philip said, turning to Treguard. 'Let me do the same for you . . .' He laid a hand on Wyrmsslayer's scabbard before Treguard could say anything but then, to everyone's amazement, he let

out a shriek of pain. The enchanted sword swung free of his grip as he backed away.

'What is it?' asked Treguard as Philip nursed his hand.

'Nothing, nothing . . . Your sword was merely hot from the sun; it scalded me.'

Treguard shrugged and brushed the scabbard with his fingertips. Wyrmsslayer did not seem that hot to him. The episode rather confirmed his opinion of priests – often men who preached about enduring hardship only to flinch at the slightest discomfort. But one would have thought a hermit who spent all his days in the fierce heat of the desert would hardly protest so noisily at a slight burn . . .

Philip caught the look in Treguard's eyes and spoke hastily. 'Come, gentlemen, the light is growing dim, and the Krak is still a mile off.' He strode off up the gully at a furious rate, nursing his injured hand under one arm.

The four companions rounded up the agitated horses and followed, presently reaching a stony plateau. There they paused to get their breath and take in the magnificent sight that greeted their eyes. The fortress headquarters of the Hospitallers stood before them half a mile away, its mighty reddish-white walls glowing in the crimson sunset. It was larger than any castle that Treguard had seen in Europe, with a mighty curtain wall and a massive inner bailey. The castle was said to be home to five thousand knights, and twice that many mounts. An aqueduct, carried on a series of graceful arches, disappeared into the side of the curtain wall and supplied the castle with water in times of siege.

Treguard turned to look back the way they had

come. The view from the plateau was as breathtaking as the castle itself. On one side the distant Mediterranean was like a burnished copper shield in the setting sun; on the other, the mountain dropped two thousand feet to a valley where twinkling lights were even now appearing. Treguard knew that the town they could dimly see down there was in Arab-held territory, and that tomorrow they would be travelling through it – with all the dangers that that implied.

He had anticipated that his old friendship with Cedric of Wrabsby, a former Hospitaller whom he had met at the Alvingham Tourney, would secure him and his companions lodging and supplies for their journey, but now it seemed that even that introduction was unnecessary. Philip the Presbyter had continued down the road towards the castle as the four companions took in the view. They heard him call up to the guards manning the curtain walls, and soon the massive gates groaned open. Philip waited for them to catch up before walking through into the heart of the massive fortress.

At close quarters, the sheer scale of the castle was breathtaking. They were like ants entering a huge mound. Knights and men-at-arms milled around them wearing the Order's distinctive garb of black surcoat adorned with a white cross. Treguard recognized some familiar faces from the various adventures of his youth, and soon his hand was being shaken and long-neglected friendships re-established. Dimly he noticed that Philip had made his excuses and slipped away, pleading a need to fast and keep vigil in the chapel.

Suddenly there was a parting in the throng and a

magisterial figure in subfusc robes could be seen making his way towards them, a group of the senior knights in attendance around him. To Treguard he needed no introduction; this was the Grand Master of the Order of the Hospitallers, Reginald of Chatillon, one of the most important men in Outremer. Treguard bowed before him, and the Grand Master graciously extended his hand, touching the Saxon lord's head in blessing.

'You are welcome, Treguard of Dunshelm,' he said after introductions were made, 'and so also are your companions. Perhaps you would dine with me tonight; I am curious to know what has brought you to the Holy Land.'

Reginald led them through into the massive keep of the castle. Everyone that he passed stopped to give him a military salute, fist over their hearts. To Dugald it was a new experience; although the Hospitallers were technically monks, they were very different from any others he had encountered – certainly more harsh and warlike than the serene brothers of St Severin Abbey.

Presently they found themselves in the Grand Master's private chamber. A select group of knights gathered round as the travellers ate. Treguard flinched when he saw a pitcher of wine tilt over and drain itself as if at its own volition, but, apart from this one unnoticed sign of his presence, Elshander seemed to have decided to remain on his best behaviour. When they had finished eating, Treguard told the assembled company of his meeting with the Templar, Hubert of Lindfield, and of their mission, Reginald nodding his head slowly all the time.

When he had finished his tale, the Grand Master eyed him for a moment before saying, ‘This is an extraordinary story. Even if it is only half correct, I wish you luck in your venture. Naturally the Hospitallers must stay aloof from mundane politics, since we owe our allegiance solely to the Holy Father himself; but I must say that John of England has been scant help to those of us who have fought the heathens all these years. An heir of the Lionheart’s on the English throne would be another matter – he was a great monarch, a lord of men who knew his duty to God! However, the citadel of the Nizari – the Assassins, as you call them – has proved itself too much for many a Christian knight before you, and not without cause has it earned its nickname, the Fortress of Death. It is virtually impregnable, and the fanaticism of its warriors is enough to give even the bravest warrior pause.’

Treguard nodded. ‘So I have heard. Nonetheless, we are determined to enter and discover if the heir is imprisoned there.’

‘Lord Dunshelm’s dauntless spirit does him credit,’ broke in Abraham, ‘but I also believe in being forewarned. What can you tell us of the Assassins of Alamut, Grand Master?’

Reginald leaned back in his chair. ‘No Christian can speak with certainty on this subject. By one account, the young warriors of the Nizari faith are kept drugged in a beautiful garden within Alamut’s walls. They are thus deluded into believing they have passed into Paradise, and when they are called back to do the bidding of their king, Hasan, they think of themselves as invincible warriors that no obstacle or physical pain can stop. As for the castle itself, it is

filled with deadly traps and fell creatures of wizardry. I admire your courage, but you are only three men – what can you hope to achieve against all these odds? I urge you not to waste your lives.’

Treguard wondered what Reginald would say if he knew they were actually four, but he passed over this unwelcome thought quickly. ‘Sir,’ he said, ‘though we are few in number, we could not live our lives for shame if we did not try this venture.’ Dugald and Abraham nodded their heads in agreement.

‘Well said; God speed you, then. Your horses will be fed and made ready for you, and I will see you are supplied with all the provisions that you need.’

Reginald gestured to one of his lieutenants, who hurried forward to lead them to their chambers. At their departure, the other knights dispersed to their own sleeping quarters and the dining room was left empty. For a few minutes servants bustled about clearing plates and snuffing candles, then all was quiet. Moonlight shining through a high window gave the deserted room its only illumination. In utter silence, a shadowy figure stepped out from behind one of the wall-hangings where he had lain hidden all evening. It was the man who called himself Philip the Presbyter. He had positioned himself behind the arras so he could overhear all that was said.

A small movement behind one of the tables made him start, then he smiled as he heard the squeak of a mouse. He now saw its small white body moving about in the darkness as it nibbled at discarded crumbs. Philip smiled a wax-pale grin of satisfaction and made his way hurriedly to the castle stables. He

had important news to give to his master, the man known as the Old Man of the Mountains: Hasan, Lord of Assassins. News that would not brook a single night's delay.

CHAPTER FIVE

As the Grand Master had promised, Elshander's four horses were saddled and ready before dawn. One of the stable-boys gave a surprised yelp when his ear was tweaked fiercely while he was tightening one of the saddle girths. The boy looked around for his assailant, but there was no-one within yards of him. Treguard, noticing, nodded to the others. Since Elshander's undignified encounter with the Presbyter he had kept an unusually low profile. Now the stable-boy's discomfort indicated that the dwarf was with them. Although he could hardly bring himself to forgive him for what had happened at Tortosa harbour, Treguard knew that the dwarf, with his experience at negotiating underground passages, could be of great use in getting them into Alamut. The three men gave their thanks to Reginald and rode out of Krak towards the Ayyubid territory to the east.

The path down was precipitous and the Arab horses, although sure-footed, had to tread carefully. Soon the valley and the dun hills around them swam in a dusty haze of heat. Treguard stared ahead, watching for signs of hostile patrols. Eventually he spotted movement on the path way below, and motioned for the others to halt. A group of four white-robed monks carrying a bier slowly came into

view, struggling up towards them on the steep incline.

Abraham had encountered all manner of groups in Genoa, and recognized these from their habit. 'They belong to the Order of St Simeon Stylites,' he told his companions. 'We'll not get much gossip from them, though – the Order has a strict vow of silence. On the rare occasions when they must break the vow, a long period of fasting is prescribed as penance.'

A corpse covered in winding sheets joggled about on the bier. Treguard gestured for the others to pull off the path as the monks drew abreast. They had evidently had enough of their burden for the moment and, seeing the presence of the two knights, decided that this was a safe place to lay down the bier for a short rest. The two groups studied one another in silence for a moment, then Treguard leaned down from his saddle and offered them his water flask. This they passed from one to another, drinking eagerly.

When they had finished, Treguard gestured towards the bier. 'You have our condolences at your bereavement,' he said. 'Was he a member of your Order?'

The monks looked uncomfortably at one another. Their expressions suggested a great inner torment, as if a weighty secret warred with their vows of silence. Finally the eldest of them nodded his head and, to Abraham's immense surprise, opened his mouth to speak.

'Our thanks for your concern, sir knight. It is indeed a great loss – the most holy man of our Order, foully murdered two days ago in the hermit's cave that he had not left for the last twenty years. The

very saints are surely wrathful at this outrage.'

'These are evil times,' said Dugald.

'It is this cursed land of the heathen that is evil,' said the monk with still more feeling. 'And none more evil than the furtive villain who slew Philip the Presbyter.'

'The Presbyter?' said Treguard. 'How can that be? We met him but last night, and he was as alive as you or I.' He rode his horse around the bier for a closer look at the body, but the cowl had meant that he'd had no clear sight of the Presbyter's face. One thing was sure, though – this man had never suffered from leprosy; even in death, his face was as noble and serene as a sculpture.

'You met with either a ghost or an imposter,' stated the monk, 'for we have been on the road carrying his bier for two days and nights. Now, if you'll excuse us, we hope to reach Krak before midday. Go with God.' He beckoned his companions and together they resumed their burden, staggering up the mountain side towards Krak des Chevaliers.

Treguard turned to his companions. 'You know what this means. The man we met was an Assassin spy. He may already be ahead of us, riding with news of our arrival to Alamut. Let us make haste, my friends! Ride like the west wind!'

They dug their spurs into their horses' flanks and thundered down the steep slope into the east.

Unbeknownst to them, the man who had claimed to be Philip the Presbyter – and whose real name was Rashid al-Athir – was many leagues off, and even now approached the grey volcanic hills in which the fortress of Alamut was situated. The path he had

chosen through the desert would have normally taken more than a week to ride; but his mount had galloped on through the night without pausing once, despite its obvious exhaustion. The ground flew under its hooves and the miles sped by with such speed that Rashid had to suck the air into his lungs. Sweat poured from the horse's flanks. Finally it came to a halt in a cloud of dust beneath the grim grey walls of the castle.

Rashid dismounted stiffly and, as he did so, the sorcery he had cast on the horse to sustain it was dispelled. It sank to its knees and then rolled over on its side, its mouth frothing with foam and its heart beating painfully in its mighty chest. Within moments it had given one final shudder and died, its eyes rolling up into its head.

Rashid was unmoved by the scene. He strode imperiously up a long stairway of rock that led to the great iron gates of the castle. As he made a mystic gesture with his hands, the gates swung open in front of him to reveal the gloomy inner courtyard of the Fortress of Assassins. No man or living thing could be seen to stir inside the forbidding place, but this did not deter Rashid, who strode on. The gates shut behind him with a deep clang. He walked across an empty courtyard to the foot of a high tower with mosaic walls and began to climb its spiral staircase, pausing at last before a door at the top.

'Lord,' he called. 'It is I, your servant Rashid; I come to tell you of what stirs in Frankish lands.'

'Enter, brother,' a gentle voice answered from within.

Rashid pushed open the door. The minaret chamber in which he stood was open on all sides to the sky,

giving spectacular views of the mountains and the Caspian Sea. A wiry, white-bearded old man sat cross-legged on a brocade cushion at its centre. A manuscript stood open on the low cedarwood table in front of him. Rashid bowed low. The Old Man of the Mountains remained crouched over his scroll.

'Rashid,' he said, still studying the text. 'You are accomplished in the arcana of our faith. Tell me, then; what is the source of all power?'

Rashid shifted uncomfortably; it was a question for the merest novice. 'My lord, all power comes from God Himself.'

Hasan grunted. 'Then do not allow pride to sully your use of the powers you have been granted. Our horses are God's gifts to us; we should not use and discard them like broken wagons.'

'But, lord . . .' Rashid blurted out.

'Yes, yes,' Hasan cut in. 'You had urgent news to bring me – incautious Christian chatter reaped by your eavesdropping. And so, keen to show your cleverness, you decided to kill a horse. Beware, Rashid; God is merciful, but He may dispense with you as easily.'

Rashid nodded mutely.

With a sigh, Hasan let the ends of the scroll roll together gently. He gestured at the carpet in front of him. 'Be seated, brother, and tell me this news which has cost a creature's life.'

'Lord, but yesterday I was close to the Hospitalers' fort, waiting to ambush infidels as they came up the path in the dusk. A strange group of travellers happened along. One was a dwarfish jinni hidden by an invisible cloak, another a Jewish merchant; the other two were Christian knights.'

'A curious band of travellers,' conceded Hasan. 'Particularly the jinni.'

'What is more, when I sought to ensorcel the knights' weapons, one of their swords burnt me with its magic . . .' He held out his hand for Hasan to inspect. An ugly red weal showed where he had grasped Wyrmslayer's scabbard.

'The sword was inimical to those who study the mystic arts,' mused Hasan. 'What else?'

'Later, I hid myself in the Grand Master's dining chamber to overhear what they said to him. Lord, they plan to come here.'

To Rashid's surprise, Hasan broke out into a soft laugh. 'Now I know you jest, brother. What could three men do against the might of this fortress – even if they do have a little jinni at their beck and call?'

'Master, they are fanatics. They come for the child of Malek Ric.'

'Indeed?' Hasan's eyebrows lifted in faint amusement. 'They are chasing dreams, then. It is a wistful parable of human futility, Rashid.'

The younger man was of a more practical bent. 'Shall I send out warriors to slay them on the road?' he asked.

'No. These madmen are a trifling matter. Prepare your own defences. I'm sure our lady friend will not be happy with the strangers' plans, incidentally; you may enlist her aid.'

'Yes, lord.'

'You are dismissed.' Hasan curtly resumed his study of the scroll.

Rashid rose and, flinging his dust-caked cloak back over his shoulders, retreated from the chamber. He hurried down the tower steps and across the

courtyard to his own chamber. He felt that his master was wrong in not sending out Assassin warriors; to Rashid's way of thinking, the wise man avoided all risk. But Hasan had commanded him, and throughout the Nizari lands his word was counted but little less than God's own law. And, after all, had not Rashid shown many times that he was the foremost sorcerer of Hasan's court? He would show his lord how faithfully he could serve. His magic would confound and destroy these invaders from the West – and, if not his magic, then the unstoppable blade of the Amazon whom the infidels called Queen Hel . . .

Treguard and the others had been travelling for many days over the desert. Since leaving the mountain path they had suffered mixed fortunes. At first they had been heartened to find the tracks of a solitary rider heading off eastwards into the wilderness in the direction of Alamut. There seemed every chance of catching the spy before he could report what he'd learned. They had set off in pursuit, hoping to overtake their quarry before nightfall; but the longer they rode, the less progress they seemed to make. Curiously, as the day wore on, the tracks they followed seemed if anything older rather than fresher.

They rode half that first night, but Treguard finally had no option but to order a rest, accepting that the spy had given them the slip. They slumped to the ground and slept where they lay, only to be awakened a few hours later when the sun grew too hot to make further sleep possible. Mounting up again, they followed the faint tracks into a series of low rolling hills where the only vegetation was a few

stunted thorn bushes. Soon after, they lost the spoor and had to rely on the sun and stars to guide them. The need to avoid Ayyubid patrols forced them to make long detours in the wilderness. Blistered by sun and fine stinging dust, they rode numbly on into the east . . .

At dusk on the thirteenth day, the harsh parapets of Alamut came into sight, bathed in the blood-red gleam of sunset. Treguard's throat was almost too parched for him to give orders, but the others knew to remain hidden. Within seconds Dugald, Abraham, and – by the sound of his groans – Elshander were off their horses and crouched behind patches of scrub.

They rested for an hour until night fell, then crept forward to observe the fortress from behind a boulder. The flanks of Alamut were sheer walls of unworked stone. Some distance off, the masonry blocks of the ramparts stood atop a high ridge above an unscaleable scree slope. Moonlight picked out the withered carcass of a horse at the foot of a steep stone staircase that led to the gates. No other creature, living or dead, was in view; no lights shone from the narrow slitted windows of the castle's towers.

'No sentries that I can see,' whispered Abraham.

'Why would they bother?' replied Treguard. 'That's a sheer three hundred foot climb, with no crack big enough even for a toehold. We'll have to find another way in.'

A scrabbling came from amongst the rocks off to one side. It was Elshander returning from a reconnaissance of the walls. 'Good news, my boon companions!' he announced. 'Elshander has found a way for us to get inside.' He led them some distance

back to an outcropping of rock. There was a fissure at its base.

Dugald peered down into the blackness. 'A cave?' he said dubiously.

'Part of a series of natural caverns,' declared the dwarf. 'They extend right under the castle.'

'We would be mad to enter,' was Abraham's opinion. 'We would soon lose our way; I will face any threat squarely, but I do not care to suffocate in claustrophobic darkness.'

Elshander could be heard to stamp his foot impatiently. 'Human, you will not get lost! We dwarves are born to such surroundings; I will lead you as unerringly as a hound guides the hunters.' He sniffed at the fissure. 'Well – will you trust me this once, or will you cower here until daybreak and let the Assassins find you?'

They looked to Treguard for his decision. 'Lead on, dwarf,' he said. 'You have been a vexatious companion up till now, but I've seen no real malice in you since that first night in the Alptrum Halls. I trust you.' But as they slipped down into the fissure, he added, 'And Wyrmslayer trusts you, too.'

Silently they readied their weapons – the two knights their swords and shields, the dwarf an oversize battleaxe which he had no doubt stolen from Krak, and Abraham his sling, for which he had collected an impressive arsenal of round pebbles. They crept down the tunnel as silently as possible, stooping as the ceiling got gradually lower. The only sound was the rustling of the knights' chainmail armour as it brushed against the rock walls. After half an hour of slow progress, they finally reached a dead end.

A stone slab was tilted across the passage overhead. 'Beyond that lie the dungeons of Alamut,' Elshander told them. 'We can lift it without danger.'

'What - no guards on the other side?' asked Dugald.

Elshander shrugged. 'I can't guarantee that. I'm just talking about the structural safety; the passage won't cave in if we shift that slab.' He took a second glance at the rock walls on either side. 'Probably not, anyway.'

Treguard looked at the others who nodded, signalling their readiness. Together they put their backs under the slab and, bunching their muscles, pushed upwards. It shifted with surprising ease, amid a shower of centuried dust. Treguard levered himself up on to the edge of the opening, followed by the others.

A strange scene met their eyes. They were standing in the deep shadows of a covered terrace. In front of them was an eerie subterranean garden, illuminated by a hundred coloured glass lanterns hanging from the branches of the trees that fringed it. White arches carved like clouds rose into the golden dome of the roof. An ornate marble fountain stood at the centre of the pale lawn, its musical tinkling producing an almost hypnotic effect, and beautifully woven Persian carpets were laid out all around it. On them reclined a hundred or more black robed warriors, their silver scimitars lying idly to one side. Veiled servant girls clad in silken gowns passed amongst the men with waterpipes and trays laden with sherbets and food. Another gently played a lyre and sang a mournful air which lent further to the enchanted atmosphere of the place. What was most

strange was that none of the warriors nor any of the servant girls spoke once during the whole time that Treguard and the others looked on. It was as though they could not see them.

'I'm used to not being seen,' remarked Elshander. 'Must be strange for you lot, though.'

Abraham stooped over the balcony above one of the Assassins and dropped a pebble in front of his face. The man remained oblivious. 'It's like a feast of ghosts . . .' he said in a tone of wonder.

'This must be the Garden of Paradise that Reginald told us of,' Treguard said. 'These warriors are drugged - focusing their minds while they await instruction. We'll be able to sneak past them easily.'

He spoke too soon. Suddenly a single dull chime sounded through the underground garden. The warriors awoke like sleepwalkers from their trance. A hundred hands grasped sword-hilts as they rose to their feet. 'The infidels have arrived,' said one of them. 'We must slay them before we can return to Paradise.'

Elshander had been on the point of filching an enormous tray of viands just as this happened. Suddenly he found himself wrestling with the serving girl holding it, who maintained her grip on the tray out of simple astonishment. As it pulled out of her hands and flew off, apparently of its own volition, she gave a soft cry. Several of the nearest Assassins turned to stare at the tray as it sped back towards the terrace where Treguard and the others were standing.

'Their jinni has made itself invisible,' one of the warriors called to his fellows. 'Have a care, my brothers.'

Treguard cursed. ‘Quick, we’ll have to run for it!’ he shouted, racing off along the terrace.

The others lost no time in following. As they did so, a flurry of lethally sharp throwing-spikes shot over their heads and stuck deep into the wall. Ahead of them, the tray floated rapidly away, its contents diminishing by the moment. A gnawed chicken wing struck Treguard on his brow as it was carelessly discarded. He cursed silently, saving his breath for running. Behind them, a black wave of Assassins poured up the steps on to the terrace. Several took a more direct route, clambering up over the balustrade to intercept their quarry. Treguard sliced two down with a single stroke of his sword, then pushed open a door and waited for his friends to catch up.

They dashed through into a vast hall, and Treguard slammed the door in the face of their pursuers. ‘That’ll hold them for a minute or two,’ he panted as he dropped the bolt into place. A muffled pounding could be heard, but the doors were of thick iron-banded oak.

‘Hold them?’ A bleak laugh cut through the hushed hallway. ‘Fools, you only have succeeded in trapping yourselves! Have you not realized? The citadel of the Assassins is a web – and you are the flies . . .’

A shadowy figure could be seen standing at the head of a flight of stairs in front of them. Even in the dim light they recognized the sinister smile of the one who had impersonated Philip the Presbyter. As the echo of his words faded away, he began to make ritual gestures with his clenched hands in the air in front of him.

There was a stench of sorcery that Treguard well recognized from his many adventures. He darted

towards another set of stairs leading down to the left, gesturing for the others to follow, but there was no time. Completing his spell, Rashid gave a shout of triumph and opened his fist. A small insect buzzed from his outstretched palm, but as it flew towards Treguard it grew in size until its membranous wings and glistening mandibles filled his view. Its talons swept down at him and there was a terrible shriek of scored metal as it scratched sparks from his helm. Treguard was unhurt, but the force of the collision knocked him to the ground. The creature soared up towards the rafters of the hall, turning for another pass.

He got to his feet shakily, raising Wyrmslayer. The creature thundered down at him again on its gauze wings; but before it could reach him there was a whoosh as Abraham swept his sling over his head, sending one of his pebbles in an unerring trajectory at the creature’s head. The stone smashed into one of the many-faceted eyes, and the thing screeched deafeningly before plummeting down in a tangle of twitching limbs. Its momentum carried it over their heads and it careered into the first wave of Assassins who had just broken through the door. Lashing out with its tail in its maddened death-throes, it sunk a barbed stinger into one man, who gave a curious choked cry and then collapsed across the carcass.

Another Assassin jumped into the breach, his scimitar raised to slash at Abraham. With no time to reload his sling, the merchant stood defenceless, but then Dugald stepped forward and almost casually drove the point of his sword through the Assassin’s throat.

'Good teamwork,' said Treguard, 'but now it's time for a tactical withdrawal.'

With Abraham behind them, he and Dugald began to back down the stairs. They could hear Rashid's screams of fury echoing down after them. More and more Assassins surged through the door into the hall and were directed in pursuit by the sorcerer. The two knights were now confronted by a solid front of black-clad warriors, slowly pushing them back down the stairs. Their foes had the advantage of height and, worse still, the angle of the stairs' descent gave Abraham no opportunity for a shot.

The first of the Assassins lunged at Dugald. The young knight's reflexes were good, and his sword shot up to parry the blow, but the scimitar smashed through it as if it were made of glass. He gave a cry and staggered back, blood spreading from a gash across the forearm. Rashid, standing at the top of the stairs, shrieked with amusement to see that the curse he'd placed on Dugald's sword had worked so well.

'Sorcerous knave!' bellowed Treguard in righteous fury. He longed to strike the grin from Rashid's face. But there was no way he could reach the evil wizard, not while trying to fend off two attackers and shepherd the unarmed Dugald down the stairs. Somehow they reached the bottom. Abraham already had a door open. 'Hurry!' he shouted in desperation.

Dugald jumped through, while Treguard parried another blow and then riposted with a blow to his assailant's heart. The man gurgled, spitting blood, and fell in front of the next Assassin. This bought Treguard enough time to follow Dugald through the

door. Abraham forced it shut while they slid the bolts across.

The small space at the bottom of the stairwell only allowed two Assassins to reach the door at one time. As they battered at it with the pommels of their swords, the three companions looked around for another exit. Elshander and the tray were drifting off towards the only obvious escape route: a long passageway that seemed to lead further into the heart of the castle. Treguard and the others followed the dwarf's trail of gnawed chicken wings.

'Hie ho, hie ho, I think we'd better go,' called back Elshander through mouthfuls of food. They saw the tray disappear around a bend in the corridor. A second later it came flying back, scattering its contents, accompanied by the sound of the dwarf's running feet. 'Watch out, master – it's huge!' he shrieked as he ran past Treguard, who had to dodge aside to avoid being bowled over.

Treguard heard Dugald gasp and glanced along the corridor ahead. A creature out of nightmare stood there. It was more than ten feet tall; four arms as thick as trees each wielded a burnished bronze axe. Its ghoulish green face was highlighted by red eyes set into sunken sockets, and yellow fangs like sickle blades hooked over its lower lip. Its body pulsed with green light, one instant appearing leathery and substantial, the next dissolving into an outline of green vapour from which the body emerged again a second later.

A splintering sound from some way behind told them that their pursuers were breaking through the door. They were now trapped between the Assassins and this axe-wielding jinni, but it would still take the

Assassins a minute or so to catch up. Treguard spat and launched himself towards the monster.

All four axes swung down together. Treguard ducked instinctively, the axes clashing together with a deafening clang just where his head had been a split-second before. He lunged again as the jinni's arms swung back – but, just as Wyrmsslayer made contact with its body, it dissolved into translucence and the sword passed harmlessly through it. The axes swung in once more, and crashed together like metallic jaws as Treguard jumped away. This time he was a fraction slower, and the blade of one axe sliced his surcoat and parted the links of his mail shirt. As he tired, it was only a matter of time before one of those colossal blows tore him open. Behind him he heard the soft sigh of slingshot cleaving the air, as Abraham tried frantically to keep the pursuing Assassins at bay. Despite the merchant's bravery, it wouldn't be long before a concerted rush would overwhelm him. Had they come so far to die here, swamped by impossible odds—?

Treguard refused to admit the possibility of defeat. As long as there was breath in his strong frame, he would fight on. He looked back at the jinni and an idea came to him. He flung himself forward once more and, as before, encountered an insubstantial wraith – but this time, instead of waiting for its body to solidify, he hurled himself right through the intangible torso. Freezing air seemed to chill him to the soul, but a second later he was rolling along the corridor behind the jinni.

He jumped to his feet. The jinni seemed confused, and was only now beginning to swing round towards him. Treguard delayed for a beat as its body began to

phase back into solidity, then he struck with all his might at its chest. Wyrmsslayer plunged through the jinni's leathery flesh and parted brazen ribs as it found its way to the creature's heart. Green ichor spouted over Treguard. The jinni gave one roar that shook the flagstones underfoot, then dissipated into mist.

'Quickly!' Treguard yelled to the others, and they came running down the corridor towards him. He saw with concern that Abraham had been struck in the leg by a throwing-spike and was limping badly. His face was white with pain, and Dugald was supporting him as best as he could despite his own wound.

'Here, take my sword,' Treguard told the younger knight, handing him Wyrmsslayer. 'I'll help Abraham.'

'I've used up all my damned pebbles – must find some more,' groaned Abraham, half delirious, and Treguard realized that the throwing-spike must have been coated with a drug.

Two Assassins burst round the corner of the corridor, only to fall like mowed corn as the invisible Elshander caught them a scything blow behind the knees with his axe. Others had spread out through the side passages in search of their quarry. Hearing the screams of these two as Elshander despatched them would soon bring them converging on this location, Treguard knew. He put Abraham's arm across his broad shoulders and helped the merchant hobble down the corridor as Dugald scouted ahead. Shouts from the stretch of corridor they had just left told them that the Assassins were hot on their heels.

Turning another corner, they entered a large chamber. Dugald was already there, standing

motionless as though rooted to the spot. The high vaulted ceiling of the chamber was supported by row upon row of pillars stretching away into the darkness at the far end. Halfway up the wall, an ornate stone gallery ran around the whole perimeter of the room; a hundred torches set in brackets below this cast amber light across the floor, illuminating a large pit in the centre.

Treguard could now see why Dugald had stopped. A figure had walked out of the shadows at the far end of the room – a majestically tall Amazon with flame-gold hair which contrasted starkly with the black Assassin's tunic she wore. She carried a small Arabian shield in one hand; a vicious spike projected from the centre so it could be used in attack as well as defence. But what transfixed Treguard's gaze was the sword she carried in her other hand. Its blade was made of purest steel and shone with liquid brightness in the torchlight of the chamber; the hilt was golden, and shaped into a lion's head. Even at this distance, Treguard could see the lion's amethyst eyes sparkle in the dim light. He recognized it straightaway as the sword Giacomo had described to him. The sword of Richard the Lionheart.

He stumbled forward as best as he could with Abraham, but just as they passed under the overhang of the gallery he saw the warrioress's eyes flicker upwards. He followed her line of sight, but too late – a silver cage that had been suspended by a chain over the side of the gallery had been released, and was now hurtling down towards them. Had he been alone Treguard might have dodged it, but the burden of his wounded comrade slowed him up. The cage crashed down on the flagstones, imprisoning them.

Treguard looked up to see the sorcerer Rashid smirking down from the balcony.

Treguard gave a mighty roar of rage and wrenched at the bars of the cage, but he was trapped and Rashid knew it. Abraham was unable to help; dazed by the poison in his wound, he slumped weakly to the floor. Rashid merely folded his arms and smiled, settling himself to watch the mortal combat between Dugald and Queen Hel.

The warrioress advanced with the grace of a great cat towards the young knight. Dugald backed away, raising his shield and sword defensively. He was stepping back dangerously close to the pit in the centre of the room. Treguard yelled out a warning; Dugald stopped in the nick of time, his heel on the very lip of the pit, and started circling back into the further recesses of the chamber using the pillars as cover.

Queen Hel's attack came in a blur of speed. Feinting first to the right and then to the left in a circular backstroke, her third blow thudded down on the centre of Dugald's shield which he had just managed to raise in time. Splinters of wood flew through the air, and Dugald stepped back again as another blow came crashing down. Again the shield stopped it, but it was now smashed beyond repair. The young knight let it drop to the ground. Watching helplessly from the cage, Treguard shouted out to him to beware the pit which again was just behind him.

The amethyst eyes of the lion's head seemed to glow malevolently in the gloom, as if sensing the young knight was nearly finished. Another blow came hurtling down, and sparks flew as Wyrmsslayer

parried the blow. Treguard could see that Dugald's strength had been sapped by the wound he'd sustained earlier. Even fresh to the fray, he doubted the young knight had the battle-experience to stand against an adversary as formidable as this Queen Hel. Each blow she unleashed came with the speed of a deadly snake, and each breath could be Dugald's last. He strained impotently at the bars of his prison, but even the furious battering of his mailed gauntlets made no impression on the enchanted silver of the cage.

Queen Hel sent another whirling blow at Dugald's head. He barely managed to parry it, his arms now feeling like dead wood. His breath rasped in the stillness of the chamber and sweat soaked his robes, though his foe still moved with the casual grace of a dancer. As he stumbled she struck again, but this time thrusting her spiked shield at his midriff as she did. Dugald groaned as it struck home, and he staggered back clutching the wound. Blackness began to cloud his vision. Treguard gave a howl of anguish; he had witnessed a hundred swordfights, and he could see that Dugald was now going to be killed.

Queen Hel contemptuously dashed Wyrmsslayer from her opponent's grasp, sending it skittering over the flagstones towards the cage. It stopped just over an arm's length away. Try as he might, Treguard could not reach it. He snarled in frustration, then felt something being thrust into his hand; it was Abraham's sling. The merchant had fought off the temporary effect of the drug and now managed a weak smile of encouragement. Treguard took the sling and flung it out, snagging the end of Wyrmsslayer's hilt and

pulling the sword towards him. His fingers closed around the hilt, and as he hefted it he gave a glance up to Rashid. The wizard was no longer smiling.

'Now the tide has turned,' said Treguard with deathly calm. He sliced the magic blade around and there was a screech of tortured metal as it rived the bars apart. He stepped out into the chamber with Abraham staggering close behind.

Queen Hel was now playing with Dugald as a cat would a captive mouse. Circling him, she nicked him with slight wounds whenever he tried to break away. Each step he took backwards brought him ever closer to the edge of the pit but, half fainting from loss of blood, he failed to realize the danger.

Treguard gave a cry and bounded forward but, as he did, he caught a flash of movement from above him on the gallery. Rashid was casting another spell. The ground at Treguard's feet suddenly turned into a churning quagmire and he sank waist deep into a slough of bubbling mud. He desperately grabbed at the floor around its edge. Rashid's taunting laugh made his blood boil with fury.

As Abraham struggled to help him out of the mire, Treguard could see that Dugald's situation was still more desperate. He was teetering on the very edge of the pit. With a cry of triumph – the only sound she had uttered in the whole fight – Queen Hel leapt forward to finish him. Suddenly her head jerked to one side as if it had been struck a mighty blow, and she slowly fell to her knees. Blood spread in a pool across the flagstones as she slumped forward.

The sudden turn in events came too late for Dugald. He had taken another step backwards at Queen Hel's renewed attack; now he toppled over

into the pit with a thin scream. Abraham managed to drag Treguard clear just as they saw Elshander materialize from the invisible folds of his cloak. Blood dripped from his axe. He gave Queen Hel's body a derisory kick and then hurried to the edge of the pit. As Treguard and Abraham rushed up, they found him dangling the cloak down towards Dugald, who was clinging half-conscious to a ledge about six feet beneath the lip of the pit. Below lay utter darkness and, they sensed, a limitless void.

Dugald's strength was fading fast, but he managed to grab the end of Elshander's cloak. Together all three of them hauled at it. There was a loud rip as it began to tear along a seam. 'Pull yourself up!' yelled Elshander frantically. 'It's about to give!'

Inch by agonizing inch, Dugald clawed his way up the ripping fabric. Just as they were on the point of reaching down to manhandle him back to safety, the stitches finally gave. Dugald let go of the cloth as Treguard's hand shot out, seizing his in an iron grip. The larger portion of the enchanted cloak went fluttering down into the void. With a herculean effort, Treguard lifted Dugald clear of the pit and swung him over on to the safety of solid ground.

Elshander gave a cry of despair as he watched most of the magical cloak spinning off into the darkness. 'Those aren't easy to come by, either,' he said glumly. He gave the remaining fragment of the garment a rueful look, then tossed it away with the rest of the cloak.

The others had fallen silent as the grimness of their situation became clear. Queen Hel might have fallen, but the rest of the chamber was now filling with black-clad Assassins. They were completely

surrounded. A glance at Abraham and Dugald told Treguard that they were in no shape to fight. He planted his feet in a combat stance and stood ready to give battle.

Elshander cast him a sidelong glance and retrieved his axe before moving to stand back-to-back with him. 'I never asked to be thawed out of the blasted ice in the first place,' he said over his shoulder.

'I never asked you along, if it comes to that,' replied Treguard with a grim smile. 'But I'll tell you one thing, if we get out of this one I'll cook you an elephant in my own kitchens.'

'How strange, the things you men of the west say to one another in the last moments of life,' rang out a reedy voice. A stooped figure moved into the light at the end of the hall. An elite cadre of Assassins advanced in a protective line ahead of him. He looked at Queen Hel lying in a pool of blood, and at the four companions beside the bottomless pit.

'Who are you?' said Treguard. 'As if I couldn't guess.'

The old man inclined his head in a slight bow. 'My name is Hasan; however, I believe you Franks know me as the Old Man of the Mountains.'

'Old man?' snorted Elshander. 'This whippersnapper? He can't be more than seventy years old!'

Hasan ignored the jibe. 'You are brave, and we admire that,' he said. 'But your impudence cannot go unpunished. If others heard of your exploits and thought they could strike at the heart of the Nizari with such impunity, we could never rest. So I will bid you farewell, men of the west.' He waved his Assassins forward. 'Finish them.'

Elshander chose this blackest of moments to burp.

'All that rich food from the tray,' he muttered apologetically. 'Oh no, I'm going to be sick, I'm afraid.'

With a sound akin to a volcanic eruption, the dwarf let out a thunderous belch of a like no mortal had ever produced. A geyser of steaming lava shot from his mouth on to the central pillar of the hall. The pillar dissolved like ice where it had been struck and, with a great groan, the stone roof above their heads began crumbling. Huge masonry blocks tumbled down as other pillars gave way under the strain. With an awful shriek from Rashid, the stone gallery detached itself from the wall and smashed to the ground in a shower of dust, killing the wizard.

Treguard was thrown to the floor and lost consciousness as a fallen stone caught him a glancing blow. When he came to only moments later, he found himself looking up at the starlit sky through a ragged gap where the ceiling had once been. A pall of choking dust still hung about the hallway, but he could see that the floor was now covered with fallen blocks of stone and toppled pillars, underneath which he glimpsed the crushed bodies of the Assassins.

Miraculously, the rubble had missed the four companions. Treguard saw with relief that they too were struggling to their feet. Queen Hel's body lay under a section of vaulting, her blue eyes staring sightlessly up at the sky. Treguard gently prised open her stiffened fingers and removed the sword from her grasp. He turned and handed the weapon to Dugald, who was coughing as he brushed the dust from his surcoat.

'Here's a sword to replace the one you lost.'

Dugald accepted it with a diffident smile. 'I'll carry it until we find Richard's heir,' he said.

'You have already done so, infidel.' To their amazement, they saw Hasan, unscathed like them, walking towards them through the pall of dust.

Treguard squinted at him menacingly. 'You're beaten, Old Man; give us no more of your tricks. I have little stomach for further killing, but I can manage one more wizened carcass if I must.'

Hasan spoke as if he had not heard. 'I alone have survived, of all the warriors of Alamut. Now my students truly enjoy the fruits of Paradise, while I must sit to the end of my days in this sad ruin.' He gestured around him at the shattered hall.

Treguard strode forward and seized the front of Hasan's robes. He lifted the Old Man until they were eye to eye. 'Where is he?' he growled. 'Where is the Lionheart's heir?'

Hasan gazed levelly back at him. 'That one lies dead among my warriors,' he said.

Dugald stared at him wide-eyed. 'What?' he cried. 'You devil – he's lying, Treguard!'

Hasan shook his head; the expression in his eyes was almost pity. 'Malek Ric, as we called the Lionheart, left his child with Sultan Salah al-Din when he returned to the west. When later we slew the Sultan, I had my warriors bring the child to me. This much is true. But it was no son – look, outsiders, can't you see the truth when it lies before you . . . ?'

They followed his gaze to where the body of Queen Hel lay half-buried in the rubble. Treguard took in the regal stature, piercing blue eyes, and fiery auburn hair now spattered with her lifeblood. Suddenly he

knew the truth, and it brought a sob to his lips.

'Malek Ric gave her the name Rosamund,' Hasan explained. 'She grew up among us and became the most faithful of my students. What a queen of England she would have made, eh, infidel?'

Treguard suddenly felt very weary of bloodshed. Releasing the Old Man, he went over and sank to his knees beside the corpse. 'Sleep, then, Rosamund,' he said, closing the sightless blue eyes. 'Your life was twisted by lies, but in death you are a princess of England.' He turned slightly away from the others so that they could not see his tears - the first he had shed since the murder of his family nearly twenty years before.

They departed from the citadel as sunrise spread a silver wash through the eastern sky. Dugald caught up with Treguard, striding ahead, and placed a hand on his arm. 'I'm sorry we came so far for nothing,' he said.

Treguard turned to him with a strange wistful look. Suddenly he gave a great booming laugh and threw his arms around all their shoulders. 'For nothing, lad? That is bitter talk, for look what we've achieved. We thawed the heart of a merry rascal, cleaned up the silk route for the craftiest burgher in Genoa, and I have found me an adopted son!'

'And we recovered that lost sword,' added Elshander, licking his lips greedily as he eyed the jewelled pommel.

'... Not to mention whatever adventures await us on the journey back west,' put in Abraham.

Dugald nodded and gave a faint smile. 'Maybe so, but it is hard to deal with failure. I had high hopes

that we would bring back the Lionheart's heir to rule England, you know.'

'As to that,' said Treguard, turning his face to the west, 'well, King John is a selfish and sinful knave, and the poorest of men to sit on England's throne - but, for all his faults, I'd rather the devil I know than any Queen Hel. Now come, my friends, for there is an alehouse in Tortosa that I know, and we shall enjoy such an evening there that none shall leave the table unaided!'

THE END

THE KNIGHTMARE CHALLENGE

You are standing in the Great Hall of Knightmare Castle, beside a tapestry depicting a battle of the Crusades. Treguard stands before you, the Helm of Justice in his hands. 'Now the time has come for you to prove *your* mettle,' he says. 'Remember that the dungeon beneath this castle exists to test the many qualities that a fine knight should possess. In addition to quick-wittedness, you must demonstrate bravery, diplomacy, honour and mercy. These were all virtues that Richard the Lionheart demonstrated in abundance.'

You nod, jaw set in determination even though your heart is pounding. Knightmare Castle has an awesome reputation, and you have heard that many would-be adventurers have failed to deal with its tests and traps. But when you take the Helm from Treguard, you are pleased to see that your hand is steady. 'I accept the Challenge,' you tell him.

You will need paper and a pencil for recording any items, spells and instructions that you find in the dungeon. You will also need a six-sided die, as chance may play a part in your adventure. Once you have read the rules below, you will be ready to start.

THE RULES OF KNIGHTMARE DUNGEON

1. Your Life Force Status has three possible stages: GREEN, AMBER and RED. You begin the adventure on GREEN, indicating you are unwounded and fresh for the Challenge.
2. At intervals during the adventure you will be told you have lost or gained a Life Force grade. For instance, if you are on AMBER and you are told to

lose a grade, your Life Force Status changes to RED. If you are already on RED, any further loss of Life Force will kill you.

3. Keep a list of items you're carrying. You can carry up to five items at a time. If you find an item that you think might be useful but you already have five other items, you must discard one to make room for it.

4. You can eat an item of food at an entry marked with an asterisk (*). Each item of food you eat when wounded increases your Life Force by one grade.

5. Keep note of spells that you acquire in the dungeon. You cannot have more than three spells at a time. When you cast a spell you must cross it off your list, since spells can be used only once.

6. Be true to the code of Chivalry: demonstrate wisdom, courage, justice and honour at all times.

NOW BEGIN!

1

You equip yourself with the Helm of Justice. As you are about to enter the dungeon, Treguard presents you with a choice – you can either learn a spell, or take a slice of quiche for eating later on.

If you take the quiche, note it down and turn to 13
If you want to select a spell instead, turn to 25

★2

'By my father's beard!' he roars. '*Real* men don't eat quiche.' Nonetheless he takes it away from you so as to have something to nibble on while he waits for his steak to cook. Since he seems to have nothing else to say, you leave. (Remember to delete the quiche.)

Turn to 121

3

A wise strategy, but one that will require an iron nerve and a measure of luck. Roll the die. On a score of 1, 2, 3 or 4, you get to the exit unhurt. On a score of 5 or 6, you are bitten and lose one Life Force grade.

If you survive, turn to 121

4

You pronounce the spell just as they strike. A glowing shield surrounds you instantly. The orgres' weapons are stopped in mid-swing, but the momentum of their combined attacks propels you backwards inside your force-shield – splintering the locked door behind you. As they gawp in amazement, you dispel the magical shield and run off.

Turn to 121

5

You take a running jump. With luck you might make it; roll a die.

If you score a 1, 2, 3 or 4, you get across and can continue down the stairs – turn to **52**

On a roll of 5 or 6, you fall into the pit – turn to **100**

***6**

'Ah, your pardon,' he says when he sees the crucifix. 'Tobias explained these matters to me. Evidently no faerie could comfortably hold the holy rood in its ungloved hand.'

Leading you to a table, Hordris gives you food and drink which he conjures with a wave of his wand. While you eat, he tells you of a devilish false knight who haunts the third level.

'You'll come to an ossuary with three doors,' he says. 'Go to each door in turn, in counterclockwise order, if you wish to summon this knight. Then you can banish him with your crucifix, and he will nevermore trouble you again.'

'Wouldn't it be better to just not summon him in the first place?' you ask.

Hordris snorts. 'Evil has a way of turning up uninvited. The best course is to seek it out and confront it, believe me.'

Thanking him for the meal (you can restore one Life Force grade if you were wounded) you continue on your way.

Turn to **66**

7

The goblin's blade chops deep into your thigh, painfully causing the loss of one Life Force grade. If

still alive, you hastily duck back through the doorway and hobble as fast as you can down the tunnel.

Turn to **114**

***8**

The passage emerges into a torture chamber where several braziers give off an intense, smoky heat. There is an archway opposite you, and on the floor near it lies a large misshapen sack. To your left is a serving girl who is sitting rather morosely on the flagstones. She is gagged, and bound to the wall by a chain around her wrists. To the right is a large blackboard with some unintelligible markings on it. What will you do:

Remove the girl's gag? Turn to **80**

Break her chain (if you have a chisel)? Turn to **92**

Wet a piece of chalk (if you have any) and use it to draw on the blackboard? Turn to **104**

Cross the room and leave? Turn to **116**

9

You cannot resist snapping the mousetrap shut on the crone's long nose. She gives a yelp of pain and starts running around in all directions. You take the opportunity to make your getaway. Remember you no longer have the mousetrap.

Turn to **45**

10

'That's it, that's it,' cries Motley encouragingly. 'Laugh an' the world laughs wiv yer, eh? Except for vampires an' that, of course. 'Ere, I'll tell you a

riddle. *What has one foot and is worth a thousand times as much when it's sick as when it's well?*

Think carefully about your answer, then turn to 22

11

Without doubt you are brave – or perhaps just not well versed in the lore of the Knightmare. The knights of the Elf-King's court were opponents to test even Treguard's mettle. Roll a die. On a 1 or 2 you succeed in wounding Sir Aspen; on a 3 or more he wounds you. Continue rolling the die until one of you is defeated (Sir Aspen's Life Force status is GREEN at the start of the battle).

If you win, turn to 23

*12

You step through into a very long corridor. By the light of torches set in iron brackets along the walls, you can see a door at the far end. You advance cautiously, expecting to be menaced by some fresh threat at any moment, but you reach the door without mishap.

Turn to 96

13

You advance cautiously along a narrow passage until you come to a brazier-lit hall. There are four exits in the opposite wall, each with a symbol inscribed above it. But which symbol do you think indicates the easiest route?

The Sun	Turn to 73
The Moon	Turn to 50
The Comet	Turn to 38
The Ringed Planet	Turn to 26

14

He glares at you angrily and brushes you aside. It is only a glancing tap, but it knocks the wind out of you and sends you flying back against the wall of the chamber like a broken doll. Lose one Life Force grade. Painfully, you limp out of the door while he stands fuming.

Turn to 121

15

The spell does not fully conceal you from the snakes, which are able to sense body heat. As you pick your way across the floor, one of them lashes out and bites you. Lose one Life Force grade. Panicking, you race the rest of the way (if you are still alive) and dive through the exit.

Turn to 121

*16

You stagger back, sure that he'll slay you with his second stroke, but then he looks at your face more closely and puts up his sword. 'In the dark I mistook you for someone else,' he says gruffly. 'My apologies.'

'Yeah?' you demand. 'Well, why don't you get yourself a pair of spectacles, you big—' You stop talking abruptly as he puts the point of his sword to your throat.

'You will call me lord,' he says. 'Now, say this: "May I be excused, lord?"'

Already injured, and with his sword pricking your flesh, you do as you are told.

He nods. 'Begone.'

Well, there is no sense in crying over spilled blood.

You leave by the archway he points out to you.

Turn to 28

17

A hideous little boggart with distended purple veins along its thin nose stares up at you from inside the chest. Grinning to display its tiny yellow fangs, it gives a strangely deep chortle and flings a pinch of sand into your eyes.

You try to grab the boggart and then . . . Everything. Goes. Black.

Turn to 29

18

Hordris levels his staff and unleashes a blast of frigid cold. You will have to be nimble to evade it. Roll the die. On a roll of 1 or 2 you dodge past him unscathed. On a roll of 3 or more, you are struck by the icy beam and lose one Life Force grade.

If you survive to reach the exits, turn to 66

19

Roll a die. If you score 3 or less then you reach the door and pass through safely – turn to 43. But if you score 4 or more, you are unlucky enough to be struck by a falling block of stone that crushes the life out of you!

20

As you advance, you seem to be entering an area of gathering gloom. You feel soft soil underfoot, but you can barely see your hand in front of your face. Then a ghastly groan comes out of the darkness, making your hair stand on end, and a hunched shape

lunges towards you. Its livid face and hands seem to be formed of wrinkled leather, and it is clad in robes of rotting bronze mail.

If you fight it using a chisel or a shortsword (if you have either of these items), turn to 32

If you use a MJOLLNIR spell, turn to 44

If you use a SHIELD spell, turn to 56

Otherwise, turn to 68

21

The spell charges your fist temporarily with the force of Thor's great mace. You clout the witch with such force that she is bowled over into the nearest brazier, where she shrivels to ashes in an instant.

If you now want to rescue the girl Mellisandre, turn to 33

If you just want to get away from this place, turn to 45

22

'Could be,' says Motley after hearing your answer. 'I can't remember meself, to be honest. 'Ere, what did the ball say to the skittle – "This one'll *bowl* you over!" Geddit, geddit? Got ter laugh, ain't yer?'

He keeps up this stream of effortless gibberish for some time, juggling as he does so. When you tell him that you have a quest to attend to, he hardly seems to hear. At last you manage to slip away while he is rummaging in a box for some glove puppets.

Turn to 93

*23

If you wish, you can take the elf's silver spear and/or his brooch of polished jet. Other than that, he

appears to have nothing that might be useful. You pass between the pillars and advance along the corridor, which soon narrows again.

Turn to 69

24

The Seigneur des Mouches throws up his hands across his face and gives a guttural scream. Seconds later, he is completely enveloped in a blossom of red flame that erupts out of the floor at his feet.

'Curse you, mortal,' he roars, 'you have found me out. But, though you think yourself a knight of virtue, evil will yet triumph . . .'

The fire dies down as suddenly as it appeared, leaving no trace of the mysterious knight. Now you are free to proceed.

If you go through the left-hand door, turn to 12

If you take the central door, turn to 36

If you choose the right-hand door, turn to 48

25

'Very wise,' says Treguard. 'You might always find food, after all, but magic is hard to come by. Now, which spell will you take?'

STEALTH Turn to 37

SCHILD Turn to 49

RUST Turn to 61

26

A stone slab trundles across behind you, blocking your retreat. You must hope you've made the right choice, for there is no turning back now. Continuing through near darkness for a while, you soon come to a cavernous chamber with walls of rough, unworked

stone. A gnarled tree grows out of the rock here. In its upper boughs is an old man with a grey-streaked white beard, his dirty cloak snagged by the branches.

If you call up to him, turn to 62

If you cross the chamber and leave, turn to 74

27

That wasn't such a good idea. The serpents are particularly likely to lash out when they think they are threatened. Roll a die. On a score of 1 or 2, you get across unscathed. On a 3 or 4, you lose one Life Force grade. On a 5 or more, you are severely poisoned and lose two Life Force grades. Whatever happens, assuming you survive, turn to 121

*28

At the end of a short passage, you find a room from which a newel staircase descends precipitously. You have found the way down to the second level. As you descend, you find a door in the side wall. The stairs continue down beyond this.

If you open the door, turn to 40

If you continue on down the stairs, turn to 52

*29

You awake to hear Treguard's voice booming out of nowhere. 'Bah, will you sleep all day?' he is saying. 'The boggart tricked you, and stole all your belongings while you slept!'

You soon see that this is indeed true; it has stripped you of all your items and even stolen any spells you had in your mind. Only the Helm of Justice remains.

'I forbade it to take that,' says Treguard, 'but, for your carelessness, you richly deserved to lose all else.' Ruefully you replace the Helm.

Turn to 136

30

Hordris stares at you. 'Such arrant stupidity is the proof I wanted!' he shouts. 'You goblins can prattle and prate, tricking decent human folk with your riddles, but you cannot unravel the simplest rational thought.' So saying, he gives you a hefty clout between the eyes with his wand of ice; lose one Life Force grade. If still alive, you stagger away before he decides to harm you any more.

Turn to 66

31

You fold your arms over your head and crouch down until the room stops shaking. When you look up, you see that an eerie change has come over the far wall. It now resembles a monstrous stone face with buttresses for jowls and arched vaults in place of eyebrows. Several masonry blocks part to form a parody of a mouth. 'I am Granitas!' it booms. 'Answer my riddle, or be crushed in these jaws of rock.'

You try to hide your fear. 'Speak on,' you say. 'Ask your riddle; I'll answer.'

*'You'll often see me in the sky
And yet, unaided, I can't fly;
In open field I'll seldom lie,
But indoors I'm still – what am I?'*

Think very carefully about your answer, and then turn to 55

32

The creature is a wight: the corpse of an ancient king that has been reanimated by some horrific grave-spirit. It cannot be harmed by ordinary weapons, but only by magic or solid silver. You learn your lesson too late.

33

You can free Mellisandre using either a chisel or a RUST spell. If the former then you still keep the chisel though the spell must, of course, be expended in the usual way.

If you can free her, turn to 57

If you are unable to do so, you shrug and regretfully continue on your way – turn to 69

34

You step through into a crypt. A wildly swinging lantern throws dancing shadows across the walls and starkly illuminates a fierce struggle that is taking place here. An open sarcophagus stands in the centre of the crypt, and leaning over this is a slim young woman in the white robes of a nun. But she is no ordinary nun: she has a sword buckled at her waist and wields a hawthorn stake in her hand. Amid muttered oaths, she is grappling with a hissing, snarling figure that is trying to rise up out of the sarcophagus. You can see its arms, lean and bloodless, wrestling with hers. At any moment this vampire could hurl away its valiant assailant and rise up.

If you back out and close the door, turn to 82

If you run in and help the nun, turn to 58

If you help the vampire, turn to 70

***35**

You go down through a dark cavern as high as a cathedral, where flickers of phosphorescence crawl mysteriously across the distant walls. Finally reaching the bottom of the staircase, you follow a path of grey flagstones that leads to a circular ossuary. Here, reliquary shrines store the bones of those slain by Knightmare Castle's previous lord, the evil Gruagach.

There are three huge doors in the wall of this chamber.

If you go to the right-hand one, turn to **47**

If you go to the left-hand one, turn to **59**

If you go through the one straight ahead, turn to
71

36

You find yourself in a long passage, narrow but with high rafters stretching up into gloom. As you advance towards a door that you can dimly discern at the far end, you hear a squeaking sound followed by a rustle of many leathery wings. A cloud of bats is descending out of the darkness, fangs bared to slice your flesh. You must act quickly before they envelop you.

If you know the STEALTH spell and wish to use it, turn to **72**

If you try the SHIELD spell, turn to **84**

If you have neither of these then the bats swoop down and soon suck every drop of blood from your body.

37

'Not a bad choice,' admits Treguard. 'The STEALTH spell makes you almost totally silent, and invisible to

creatures with normal vision. But it only lasts a short time, so don't idle about once you've cast it.'

Making sure you have the spell in mind (ie: note it down) you prepare to set out on your quest.

Turn to **13**

38

You go for only a short distance before you come to a vestibule with an alcove in the side wall to your right. An imp in an ermine cloak has set up a kind of makeshift stall here. Seeing you, he points to the wares laid out in front of him.

'What's this,' you say, 'an adventurers' outfitters?'

Pickle waves his hands expansively. 'It's an imp market. You must have heard of the goblin market. This is like that, except you don't get ripped off.' He laughs.

You scrutinize the objects on his stall: a jar of salt, a pair of winged sandals, a lead crucifix, a jar of oil, and a shortsword. 'Any of them might be useful,' you concede, 'but I don't have any money.'

Pickle looks furtively to right and left, then leans closer and whispers, 'Well, as long as you don't tell the gov'nor, I'll let you have 'em on credit. Take any three items you like.'

Select the items you want and make a note of them. Thanking Pickle for his help, you continue along the corridor.

Turn to **28**

39

Opening a door, you step right into a room where several drunken ogres are sitting around a table

playing dice. They are in the midst of an angry squabble over cheating, but as soon as they see you they fall silent and reach for their weapons. 'I'll bet this human is an even worse cheat than you are, Scumbore,' says one ogre to another.

If you run past them and try to get to the door on the other side of the room, turn to **99**

If you are prepared to fight them, turn to **111**

If you have a STEALTH spell to use, turn to **123**

If you try talking to them, turn to **135**

*40

The door creaks open to reveal a long room. You catch a glimpse of rats at the far end, squeaking protests at the sudden intrusion of torchlight. Entering, you see a copper-banded chest about ten metres away. However, there is a five-metre-wide pit directly in front of you. When you look down you cannot see the bottom. You drop a pebble and it takes four seconds before you hear it hit – about a hundred paces deep, then. You could not hope to survive such a fall.

If you try jumping across (you have just over a metre's clearance for a run-up), turn to **76**

If you have the winged sandals and choose to use them, turn to **64**

If you leave the room and continue down the stairs, turn to **52**

41

It sticks its fingers in its mouth and gives a piercing whistle, which is answered moments later by a large bat which comes flitting and squeaking out of the shadows. The boggart vaults on to the bat's back

and, clinging to tiny reins woven of cobsilk, starts to fly away.

'Hey!' you shout after it. 'What about the deal?'

'Not forgotten,' it calls back with a mocking laugh. 'I said I'd grant three wishes – but I didn't say they'd be *your* wishes, fool.'

It leaves you alone to reflect despondently on the stupidity of trusting a faerie creature.

Turn to **136**

*42

'Quite right, since he provided seven-eighths of my meal,' says Hordris, nodding. 'Now, since I am satisfied you are no elf or changeling and this talk has set my stomach rumbling, come share my supper.'

Hordris gives you meat and wine: restore one Life Force grade if wounded. Wishing you well in your quest, he bids you farewell and you continue on your way. 'I recommend you go west,' he calls after you.

Turn to **66**

*43

An oak-panelled passage soon brings you to a junction. A flicker of light comes from one of the two branches ahead of you, so you decide to go that way.

Turn to **69**

44

The wight gives a horrible shriek to curdle the blood as your haymaker punch knocks it back. Despite the brontic power of Thor's enchantment, the wight is only thrown off its feet, not harmed. You hurry back to the torchlit passage and close the gate, relieved that the monster seems reluctant to pursue you there.

Turn to **8**

45

Treguard speaks to you through the magical Helm of Justice. 'Remember that the dungeon is a test of virtue as well as guile,' he says sternly. 'A knight should never abandon an innocent in distress. Those who do not adhere to the code of Chivalry may find that cleverness alone is not enough.'

You shrug. Better a live coward than a dead hero, you think to yourself. But you do not say that to Treguard, and in your heart you know you should be ashamed.

Turn to **69**

46

After some distance the corridor widens out. An elfin knight stands ahead of you between two granite pillars, blocking your path. He wears a russet surcoat fastened with a clasp of polished jet, and carries a silver spear which he levels at your chest.

'Prepare to do battle, mortal adventurer,' he declares in a voice like winter winds. 'I am Sir Aspen, and my liege has charged me with seeing that none passes this point save him.'

If you have a RUST spell and want to use it, turn to

117

If you cast a MJOLLNIR spell, turn to **154**

If you draw a shortsword, turn to **11**

If you have none of these, Sir Aspen runs you through and you die on the point of his spear.

47

You approach the door.

If you want to open it, turn to **59**

If you want to go to one of the other doors, will you

choose the leftmost one (turn to **71**), or the middle one (turn to **83**)?

48

The door opens on to the end of a very long passage. There are flickering torches set in iron brackets all along the walls, and by their light you can just make out a door at the far end. You advance warily, expecting to be attacked at any moment, but to your surprise you reach the door without incident.

Turn to **96**

49

'Ah,' says Treguard. 'This spell creates a force field which can protect you against virtually any attack – but only for a short time.'

Making sure you have the spell in mind (ie: note it down) you prepare to set out on your quest.

Turn to **13**

50

A great, rune-painted door of stout oak swings closed behind you as you advance. You remember what you have often heard men say about the labyrinth below Knightmare Castle: the only way is onward, there is no turning back.

After a short time, you come to a cosy hearth where an elderly woman sits embroidering a cloak. On the table near her is a leather eye-patch into which she has stitched an N-shaped rune. You recognize this as the *haeg* glyph, which is the runic symbol of destructive power.

If you go up and speak to her, turn to **51**

If you slip past without speaking, turn to 39
If you try to sneak up and filch the eye-patch, turn to 119

51

'Hello,' she says, beaming over her embroidery. 'Are you any good at riddles? My husband told me this one and it's really got me stumped. *What is it that is something when you don't know what it is, but nothing when you do know what it is?*'

Think carefully about your reply. When you think you have the answer, turn to 63

52

Waiting for you at the bottom of the stairs is a tall man in rainbow robes. A diadem of gold encircles his high brow, and his wand is a long staff of sparkling ice. Fixing you with a furious stare, he exclaims: 'What is this? Are you, mayhap, a goblin in the guise of an adventurer? If so, prepare to be shrivelled by a spell, fell faerie beast!'

If you protest that you are not a goblin, turn to 125
If you use the STEALTH spell, turn to 137
If you use the MJOLLNIR spell, turn to 149
If you show him a crucifix, turn to 6
If you dodge past him to one of the exits on the other side of the room, turn to 18

53

It struggles and squirms for a time, and even threatens to bite you, but desists when you point out that you could easily smash its brains out against the wall.

Treguard's voice speaks to you out of nowhere.

'Capital. Whilst you hold the fay, adventurer, you can force it to help you.'

You begin by relieving it of its pouch of sleep dust (note this item down). Then you demand that it gets you back across the pit, which it does by summoning a swarm of may-bugs. These form a flying bridge which miraculously bears your weight.

'Listen,' growls the boggart. 'If you promise to release me, I'll tell you one secret. But choose carefully whose:

'Of Hordris the Confuser?' 'Of the Seigneur des Mouches?' 'Of the Wight's Tomb?'	Turn to 77 Turn to 89 Turn to 101
----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	-----------------------------------------

54

'In fact you are wrong,' says Hordris, knitting his brows. 'All the same, it was not an unreasonable mistake, since you may have assumed I intended to purchase all the loaves and then distribute some back gratis to their former owners. But consider: the notional cost of the entire meal must have been twenty-four groats, not eight.' He waves his hand. 'Ah well, since it is my birthday I have decided to give you the benefit of the doubt. Pass, adventurer.'

You hurry over to the exits before he can change his mind.

Turn to 66

55

If you answered 'kite', turn to 67 If you answered 'feather', turn to 79 If you answered anything else, turn to 91	
--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	--

56

The spell throws up a force-field just in time, and the wight's talons glance harmlessly away. Since you know the spell lasts only a short time, you hastily retreat to the gate. The wight seems reluctant to follow you into the torchlight. Its grisly howls echo along the passage behind you as you hurry on your way.

Turn to 8

***57**

'I don't know how to thank you,' says Mellisandre. 'I'm sure that old witch had some unspeakable fate in store for me if you hadn't come along. Perhaps I can give you some help towards your quest in return. I have heard of an evil lord who lurks on the third level of the dungeon. He has a habit of coming upon wayfarers and attacking them from behind, but you can force him to show himself if you find the ossuary – you just have to go to each of the three doors there in widdershins order.'

'What's the point of summoning this fellow if he's so evil?' you ask her.

Mellisandre takes a pouch of salt from her belt to give to you. 'If you threaten to throw salt in his eyes, he'll answer you a question – but remember that he always *lies*. After, you can banish him with a crucifix or mayhap some other means.'

Thanking Mellisandre for her advice, you continue on your way.

Turn to 69

58

Rushing over to the sarcophagus, you seize one of the vampire's arms. It is incredibly strong despite its

withered appearance, and its slaughterhouse breath makes you choke. As you fight to hold it down, the girl is trying to steady the wooden stake over its heart.

If you have a crucifix, turn to 106
If you use a MJOLLNIR spell, turn to 118
Otherwise, turn to 130

59

You enter a long tunnel which is lit by torches blazing in brackets along the walls. Underfoot, instead of a stone floor, you find yourself walking on an iron grille. When you drop a coin between the bars of the grille, you watch it drop out of sight into pitch darkness far below. You wait, but no sound comes echoing back to you – a bottomless pit! Still, there seems to be no cause for alarm because the iron grille should easily support your weight.

As you advance towards the door at the far end, you feel a prickly sensation of unease. Then footsteps come from behind you, ringing harshly. No, not footsteps, but hoofbeats – as though some wild beast were closing on you. Hot sulphurous breath touches the back of your neck. Whatever it is, it is right behind you!

If you cast a RUST spell, turn to 108
If you throw salt over your shoulder, turn to 120
If you have neither of these to use, turn to 132

60

Blinded, he snarls and slashes at you with a sparkling scimitar of flame that magically appears in his hand. Lose one Life Force grade. If still alive, you duck

through the nearest door and bolt it behind you.

Turn to 36

61

'That is an unusual choice,' says Treguard, stroking his beard. 'Still, if used at the right moment it could do you a lot of good.' After making sure that you have the spell memorized (ie: write it down), turn to 13

62

He peers down at you with his one eye and gives a senile cackle. 'Heh. I climbed up here to get my two pet ravens, but they flew off and now I'm caught. Give an old fellow a helping hand, won't you?'

If you decide to help him down, turn to 86

If you leave him up there, turn to 98

63

The answer was '*a riddle*'.

If you said that, turn to 75

If you said anything else, turn to 87

(Resist any temptation to cheat, since a dishonest knight can never succeed in the Challenge.)

64

You experience a momentary twinge of panic as you stride out across the pit, but the winged sandals keep you aloft just as you had trusted they would. When you reach the far side, the sandals slip off your feet and fly away before you can catch them. After replacing your regular boots, you turn your attention to the chest.

Turn to 88

65

It gives a hideous gurgling shriek, followed a few seconds later by a dull thud that echoes up out of the depths.

'Callous but not unreasonable,' remarks Treguard's voice out of empty space. 'Boggarts are like all fays – wholly unreliable. On the other hand, violence is rarely a commendable solution to a problem. Have you considered your current predicament? The boggart might have helped, if you'd known the proper way to deal with it.'

Turn to 136

66

There are two archways leading out of Hordris's study.

If you go through the eastern archway, turn to 78

If you take the one to the west, turn to 90

67

Granitas gives a hollow booming laugh. 'Wrong. Now I shall devour you.' His massive stone jaws crunch down, but suddenly you are whisked back by an unseen hand so that, instead of being utterly crushed, you take only minimal damage. Lose one Life Force grade. If you survive this, you hear Treguard's voice saying, 'The young adventurer's answer seemed fair to me, wall-monster.'

'But, master,' protests Granitas, 'it wasn't right.'

'You presume to contradict the Lord of Knightmare? Have a care, Granitas.'

'Y-yes, master.' Granitas glowers balefully at you with his eyes of jagged quartz. 'Begone, then, adventurer. You have friends in high places.'

Thanking your lucky stars, you hurry through the door.

Turn to 43

68

The wight seizes you and proceeds to tear you limb from limb. A very disarming chap, as I'm sure you would agree if you were still alive.

***69**

You arrive at a great staircase of black marble that descends into the bowels of the earth. 'Well done, adventurer,' says Treguard, speaking to you by means of the magic Helm of Justice. 'Now you have only to descend to the third level and find a certain key of luminous crystal for your quest to be judged a success. But beware, because there is yet one more great peril to menace you, and it is the most fearsome of all perils.'

Steeling your nerves, you begin to descend the staircase.

Turn to 35

70

You shoulder the young nun aside, giving the vampire time to emerge from its coffin. It is a tall, thin fiend that drifts up into the air like a corpse on the gallows. It wears mouldering robes resembling those of an abbot, except that in place of a cross around its neck there hangs a shark's tooth.

Did you expect it to be grateful to you? It reaches for you with clutching fingers, its breath smelling of rank decay. You are transfixed in fear, unable to move.

If you have a crucifix, turn to 94

If not, then nothing can save you and it is best to close the book on this dreadful scene . . .

71

You step through the door into a long tunnel. Torches blaze in brackets all along the walls, giving a smoky red illumination. The floor under your feet is not solid stone, but a stout iron grille fixed into the tunnel walls. You drop a coin between the bars of the grille and watch it fall away into the unfathomable blackness far below. It is eerie to feel you may be standing over a limitless drop, but the iron grille should easily support your weight. You start to advance towards the door at the far end . . .

You are about halfway when a clammy feeling of unease seems to grip your heart. There is a sound of footsteps from behind you, ringing harshly on the iron bars of the grille. Sudden panic roots you to the spot, and you dare not turn. As the steps come nearer, you recognize them as hoofbeats. Some rough beast is hot on your heels – now you feel its sulphurous breath against the back of your neck. Whatever it is, it is right behind you!

If you cast a RUST spell, turn to 108

If you throw salt over your shoulder, turn to 120

If you have neither of these to use, turn to 132

72

The bats cannot penetrate your magical force-field. They flock all around, chittering angrily as they search in maddened blood-lust for a way to reach you. Racing pell-mell along the corridor, you just

manage to reach the door and dive through before the spell expires. Panting, you bolt the door behind you.

Turn to 96

73

A portcullis clangs down behind you. After groping your way through the gloom for several minutes, you see firelight ahead. Soon you come to a high-raftered chamber where a huge hammer-wielding warrior with a red beard strides to and fro impatiently. He seems to be waiting for an enormous steak to grill over the fire.

If you try to sneak past without attracting his attention, turn to 85

If you know the STEALTH spell and want to use it, turn to 97

If you risk speaking to him, turn to 109

74

Leaving the strange old man to his own devices, you stumble along a rock-strewn passage and suddenly emerge into a room full of snakes! What will you do: rush across the room as fast as you can to the exit (turn to 27), tiptoe carefully across (turn to 3), or cast the STEALTH spell (turn to 15)?

75

She smiles and clasps her hands together. 'Yes, yes, I think you're right. That will confound the old devil – he never expects me to get his riddles! Let me give you a little present . . .'

She slips a silver ring around your wrist. You can use this magical item *once*. It is a ring of luck, which you can use for one automatic success in any die roll

that you have to make during the adventure. Thanking the old lady, you head deeper into the dungeon.

Turn to 39

76

You're either a superb athlete or you're crazy. Roll a die.

If you score a 1, you succeed in getting across – turn to 88

If you score 2 or more, you fall short and plummet into the pit – turn to 100

77

The boggart tells you that Hordris has lately developed a strange fixation since talking to a fanatic Templar knight. 'He assumes that anyone he encounters is actually a faerie creature in disguise – not an entirely unreasonable assumption, incidentally, here in the dungeon of Knightmare. At any rate, you can convince him of your humanity by solving one of his complicated puzzles, as he believes that fays are incapable of rational thought. Even better, show him a crucifix if you have one – the Templar explained to him that no fay can bear a crucifix, you see.'

Turn to 113

*78

Before long you come to a circular room with old rushes strewn across the floor. A jester is here, practising his juggling tricks. On the other side of the room are two doors – one with a handle of mother-of-pearl, the other with a handle of polished silver.

The jester is so intent on his tricks that he hardly seems to have noticed you.

If you want to speak to him, turn to **81**

If you cross over to the doors, turn to **93**

If you use a STEALTH spell to filch one of the skittles he's juggling with, turn to **105**

79

'Correct,' Granitas states flatly. 'You may pass.' You are about to take the door to your right when Granitas draws your attention to another, previously hidden, portal in the opposite wall. 'I'd advise you to go by that route,' he says.

If you go right, turn to **43**

If you choose the door that Granitas recommends, turn to **103**

80

'Be as quiet as you can,' Mellisandre warns you once you've removed the gag. 'That "sack" over there isn't a sack at all – it's a hideous old witch who caught me earlier. She's asleep now, but she surely intends to torture me when she wakes up.'

'More likely she intends to roast and eat you,' you say cheerfully, glancing at the braziers. When you take a close look you see that the shapeless lump is indeed a fat witch wrapped in a sackcloth skirt. Flies are buzzing around her as she sleeps.

If you drop a crucifix on her, turn to **128**

If you sprinkle her with sleep dust, turn to **140**

If you kick her awake, turn to **152**

81

You go up behind Motley and give a short cough. 'Eh? What? Whozat?' he exclaims, fumbling his

skittles. When he turns and sees you, he gives a sigh of relief and mops his brow with a multi-coloured handkerchief. 'Blimey, you didn't half give me a fright,' he says. 'I thought you were that vampire what lives around 'ere someplace. Do you feel like a sausage roll?'

If you say you do, turn to **141**

If you decline, turn to **153**

*82

Treguard's voice thunders in your ears: 'Where is your honour? The true knight would never pass by without aiding a fellow opponent of evil. Be bereft of your spells and items, and perhaps thereby you'll learn some of the humility that is part of the chivalric code.'

You find that, indeed, all your spells and items have gone. You must do your best without them.

Turn to **46**

83

You have gone to two of the doors in turn.

If you now want to go to the third, turn to **95**

If you want to open the central door, turn to **59**

84

The bats' echo-location is not fooled by the spell. Treguard did warn you that it only made you invisible to normal vision. They fall on you like great flying leeches, sinking their razor-sharp fangs into your skin and lapping the blood that gushes from your veins. You struggle weakly for a few moments, but to no avail. By the time they have finished with you, all that is left is an empty husk.

Roll the die.

If you get 3 or less, you have managed to slip through the room unnoticed – turn to 121

If you get 4 or more, you are spotted – turn to 109

'Good on you, youngster,' he wheezes in a reedy voice as you help him down. Clutching a gnarled walking-stick, he hobbles over to the roots of the tree and points to three pools in the rock there. 'Heh heh,' he cackles. 'The three fountains of the World Tree.'

They look more like puddles to you, but the old man pushes a leather water-bottle into your hands and insists you fill it. 'Go on, it'll do you a power of good,' he maintains. But which fountain will you fill the bottle from?

The first – turn to 110

The second – turn to 122

The third – turn to 134

She gives you a puzzled smile. 'Oh well, that's very clever, I'm sure, dear, but it doesn't sound quite right. Run along, now.' As she goes back to her needlework, you make your way deeper into the dungeon.

Turn to 39

On the lid is a plate bearing this inscription:

'Take off your helm

Count to three

*Make a wish
Then open me.'*

If you decide to do this, turn to 112

If you open the chest without doing what the inscription says, turn to 124

If you prefer to leave the chest alone, turn to 136

'Ho,' gasps the boggart, 'he's an evil one, all right. Midnight evil, brimstone evil, heart like burning pitch. Despatch him with a crucifix, or cast salt over your arm into his eyes. Don't trifle with him, for you risk losing that intangible that you humans call your immortal soul.'

Turn to 113

The tunnel in which you find yourself is quite narrow and slopes down into the fetid depths of the dungeon. You come to a door on your left.

If you open it, turn to 126

If you carry on along the tunnel, turn to 114

'Wrong!' booms Granitas with a kind of chill, ponderous glee. Devouring adventurers who fail to solve his riddles is Granitas's only pleasure. Today you have made a wall-monster very happy . . .

Mellisandre seems to be trying to tell you something, but you foolishly did not think to remove the gag first. The next thing you know, you are seized around the throat by a wrinkled old arm. A burly

witch has you in a stranglehold. You struggle but cannot break her grip. The last thing you see as she chokes the life from you is Mellisandre running off in terror. You managed to rescue her, so at least you did not die in vain. Your name will be on the roll of honour in the memorial crypt below Knightmare Castle.

93

If you open the door with the mother-of-pearl handle, turn to 43

If you choose the door with the silver handle, turn to 129

94

Seeing the crucifix, the vampire recoils with a cry like some wounded beast of the night. Jerked out of your paralysis, you leap up and make a rush for the door. As you reach it, you glance back. The vampire has turned its attention to the nun and is even now floating across the crypt towards her.

'Throw me the cross!' she shrieks.

If you do this before running off, turn to 46

If you decide to keep the crucifix and let the nun fend for herself as best she can, turn to 82

95

You have stepped up to each of the three doors in turn, travelling widdershins around the ossuary wall as you did so. Moments later there is a flare of red light and the stench of brimstone fills the air. You turn to see a tall knight standing in the centre of the chamber. His long surcoat drapes down to his feet, and the coat-of-arms on his shield consists of a

gold serpent on a sable field, crossed by the baton sinister.

He bows. 'Please allow me to introduce myself; I am the Seigneur des Mouches. Perhaps you are lost here in the Dream Caverns and require direction? I shall escort you . . .'

He steps forward with a curious tiptoeing gait. Will you:

Agree to go with him? Turn to 107

Show him a crucifix? Turn to 24

Cast the MJOLLNIR spell? Turn to 131

Throw salt in his eyes? Turn to 143

96

You now stand in the final chamber. Before you, on one pan of a massive pair of scales supported above a pit, rests the glowing crystal key that Treguard charged you with finding. It is balanced by another key of plain lead on the other pan.

A peal of cruel laughter makes you turn. Some distance away, a majestically-robed sorceress stands watching you, her lip curled in mockery. Behind her is a large tapestry hanging from ceiling to floor.

'Congratulations,' she says insincerely. 'You have reached your goal. I am Malice.'

You stare back at her. 'Do you mean to say I'm going to have to fight you for the key?' It is a daunting prospect: if she's half as powerful as she looks, she could fry you with a spell before you took two paces towards her.

Malice sneers. 'Not at all. Take it if you wish, and then you've beaten the Challenge. But you might like to take a look at this, first.' So saying, she tears down the tapestry to reveal a crystal casket set into an

alcove. Poor Pickle the imp is locked inside it, vainly beating on the door with his pale hands. And you see that the casket is rapidly filling with water!

'It's no ordinary casket, nor ordinary water,' Malice assures you. 'Pickle can't escape, and he'll not only drown like the mortal he'd like to be - he'll dissolve away into ectoplasmic sludge as well.'

You stare aghast at her. 'You incredible fiend!'

She only laughs. 'If it concerns you so, why not take the key that will free him? It's the leaden one there. But of course, if you do that, the other key will drop down into the pit and you'll have failed in your quest . . .'

You must make up your mind. The scales are too big for you to reach both pans at once.

If you take the crystal key, turn to 144

If you take the key that will free Pickle, turn to 155

97

You flit across the room like a shadow, ducking right between the huge warrior's legs without him noticing you. As you pass the hearth, you take the opportunity to carve a slice off the sizzling steak. The giant will hardly notice such a loss, but to someone of your size it represents a whole item of provisions. Dropping it into your backpack, you slip out of the room.

Turn to 121

98

'Why, you uncharitable sprat!' he shrieks, suddenly jumping down out of the tree to land on your back. You try to shake him off, but he clings on tightly with his scrawny limbs. Then he speaks a spell, and

the scene dissolves around you. You feel yourself changing . . .

. . . Now you are a horse, galloping madly across a desolate moor under a sky curdled with storm clouds. The old man on your back now wears a wide-brimmed hat, and in one hand he wields a spear while in the other is a hunting horn. You have been transmogrified by fell sorcery. Now and forever, you are the steed of the Master of the Wild Hunt.

99

Roll a die.

If you score 1 or 2, you manage to get the door open and escape while they are still milling about: turn to 121

If you score a 3 or more, turn to 147

100

Arms flailing in panic, you plunge into darkness. The terrific impact when you hit the bottom jars every bone in your body - lose one Life Force grade.

If you are still alive, you sit up in amazement. No-one should have been able to survive such a long fall. Then you realize that you are lying on top of something soft, and you get up to discover the squashed body of a goblin. Obviously it was lurking at the bottom of the pit waiting to loot anyone who fell down. Now that you have landed on top of it, though, its looting days are over. Searching the corpse, you discover a shortsword, a mousetrap and a piece of chalk.

Take what you want (and can carry) and then turn to 102

101

'The wight is a vile and vengeful creature that hates all living things,' the boggart tells you. 'Even Treguard cannot control it, for it was a king of this land before the Saxons came; he only keeps it pent up behind a padlocked iron gate. Best that you do not disturb it!'

Turn to 113

102

You find a door which gives on to the side of a narrow tunnel. Noticing that the tunnel slopes, you choose the direction that will take you deeper into the dungeon.

Turn to 114

103

As you leave, you notice something lying behind a block of stone in the corner. It is a chisel, presumably left here by the masons who built the dungeon. You can take it if you wish.

Then turn to 115

104

The wet chalk makes a horrible squeaking noise that makes the prisoner squirm. What a revolting person you must be! Still, you are about to get your come-uppance, because the 'sack' in the corner suddenly gets to its feet. You see now that it is actually an ugly witch in a filthy sackcloth skirt.

'That's a cunning torture,' says the witch, cackling. 'I think I'll keep you as my apprentice.' She flings a net over you, and that is the end of your adventure . . .

105

Cross off the spell now you have used it. Temporarily invisible and soundless, you creep over behind Motley and grab one of his skittles.

'Blow me,' he says to himself after a moment, 'I thought this was an act with three skittles and here I am using only two. I must be losin' me marbles – or me skittles, rather.'

You leave him scratching his head as you continue on your way.

Turn to 93

106

'Put the crucifix against its brow!' yells the nun. You do as she says, and instantly the vampire stiffens in rigor mortis. Only its eyes still move – bloodshot orbs that roll horribly as it helplessly beholds its destruction. The nun impales it through the heart, then severs its head with her sword and stuffs the mouth with garlic flowers.

You reach out to retrieve the crucifix, but she stops you. 'Leave that in place,' she advises. 'You can't have too many precautions where these blood-suckers are concerned.'

Turn to 142

107

He takes you firmly by the arm and the two of you immediately begin to sink into the stone floor! 'Going down,' he says, then gives a dry laugh.

'Where to?' you ask, alarmed. 'What about the three doors? You said you were going to escort me through the Dream Caverns.' The sensation of

drifting down through the absolute darkness of solid rock is eerie and unsettling.

'What's puzzling you,' says the Seigneur des Mouches, 'is the nature of my game. It is not Treguard's game, I admit. You're not on your quest any more; I have something else planned. But I guarantee you will have a hell of a time.'

From far below you can hear the sound of screaming and wailing – faint at first, but getting louder. Gusts of sulphurous heat waft up from the depths.

With a sinking feeling in your heart, you realize your mistake. But it is too late. You have failed the Knightmare Challenge.

108

The spell disintegrates the grille under your feet. Your pursuer gives a snarl which sounds as much like thwarted rage as panic. He falls down into the void, and you catch a glimpse of fluttering yellow and black robes out of the corner of your eye. But unless you have a pair of winged sandals, you fall too – plunging down and down through limitless blackness for ever.

If you do have the winged sandals, you can walk on air to the door at the far end; turn to 96

109

He seems more interested in his stomach than in you. 'Look at this brontosaurus steak,' he bellows, indicating the massive slab of meat over the fire. 'I've been waiting ages for my dinner. Will it never cook?'

Do you:

Suggest he cuts the steak into thinner slices? Turn to 133

Suggest he puts more wood on the fire? Turn to 145

Offer him a slice of quiche (if you have one)? Turn to 2

Recommend he becomes a vegetarian? Turn to 14

110

'The pool of Wisdom,' sniggers the old man. 'Aye, that's a tasty one.'

Suddenly you flinch back. To your disgust, there seems to be an eye floating under the water.

If you go ahead and fill the bottle anyway, turn to 146

If you prefer to try one of the other pools after all, turn to either 122 or 134

111

Alone against a horde of belligerent orgres? Even Treguard or Mike Tyson would think twice about that! Still, you might get lucky . . . roll a die.

On a score of 1 or 2, they thrash you within an inch of your life (reduce your Life Force to RED) and then get bored, leaving you to crawl off – turn to 121

On a die score of 3 or more, though, they don't stop until you resemble a puddle of raspberry jam!

112

Decide carefully what your wish is, then push back the lid when you are ready.

Turn to 17

113

As agreed, you let the boggart go. It hisses and spits a few curses, but you utter equally vicious countercurses

and finally it runs off. You leave the room and continue down the stairs.

Turn to 52

114

The tunnel ends in a chamber of roughly-hewn masonry blocks. There is a door in the right-hand wall, but as you move towards it a sudden and violent earth tremor nearly knocks you off your feet. A shower of dust is falling from widening cracks in the far wall.

If you try to run for the door, turn to 19

If you wait for the quake to subside, turn to 31

*115

You go along a passage which abruptly turns to the right. At the bend in the passage there is a padlocked iron gate set into the left-hand wall.

If you use a RUST spell on the gate, turn to 127

If you smash the lock with a MJOLLNIR spell, turn to 139

If you took the chisel and want to use it, turn to 151

If you pass by the gate and continue along the passage, turn to 8

116

Just as you reach the threshold, the thing you took to be a sack suddenly leaps up and grabs you! It is actually a grotesquely fat witch clad in a length of dirty sackcloth.

If you have a mousetrap, turn to 9

If you use a MJOLLNIR spell, turn to 21

Failing either of these, you are held fast. You may

have a role to play as the ingredients in the witch's next spell, but this is the end of your life as an adventurer . . .

117

The spell has no effect whatsoever on his enchanted silver spear. Narrowing his pale grey-green eyes, he says, '*Mortal, can you answer this riddle? I speak of one who is like a doctor, for he visits all of the sick and the aged without fail, and a single ministration never fails to end their illness. Yet he also loves battle and is seldom far from any mêlée, though he wields no weapon himself and cares naught for any faction – all men are the same in his eyes. A man who is sad may welcome him; one who is happy protests his coming.*'

So saying, he flings his spear and it impales you through the heart, bringing death instantly.

118

Engorged on the blood of its last victim, the vampire is torpid and too slow to dodge the magically-enhanced power of your punch. While it lies momentarily stunned, the nun drives the stake into its dead heart and then uses her sword to decapitate the corpse.

Turn to 142

119

She is quite absorbed in her embroidery, so she may well not notice you. Roll a die.

If you score 1, 2, 3 or 4, you manage to steal the eye-patch and can continue on your way with it:
turn to 39

If you score 5 or 6, however, then she looks up as

you approach and you will have to speak with her: turn to 51

120

Whoever is there gives a shriek of pain as though burned by acid. Lashing out blindly in his rage, he wounds you for the loss of one Life Force grade. If you survive this, you can run on and escape through the door at the end before his vision clears.

Turn to 96

121

You arrive at a long, draughty chamber. As you enter, you see a broad-shouldered man standing with his back to you just a few paces away. Hearing you enter, he turns. You see that he has a sword in his left hand, but his right arm ends in a stump. Squinting at you in the gloom, he suddenly raises his sword and slices out at you! If you have a SHIELD spell you can use it but you still lose one Life Force grade. Without this spell, his blow inflicts the loss of two Life Force grades.

If you survive, turn to 16

122

The old man claps his hands together and jumps up and down gleefully. 'The pool of Life, the pool of Life!' he cries. 'What an excellent choice. Like wine, this water is all you need to sustain you.' Well, if he subsists entirely on a diet of wine then that could explain a lot. The filled bottle counts as one item. You can drink it at any entry marked with an asterisk, and it will immediately restore your Life

Force to GREEN. Bidding the old man goodbye, you continue on your way.

Turn to 74

123

To the ogres, it simply seems that you have vanished. 'Eh?' says one, rubbing his bloodshot eyes. 'Am I seeing things?'

'Wait!' says another. 'I can still smell mortal flesh, can't you? The little trickster just turned invisible, that's all.'

Roll a die.

If you score 1, 2, 3 or 4, you manage to slip past them and get out of the door – turn to 121

If you score 5 or 6, they catch you as you are still trying to get the door open – turn to 147

124

Crouched in the interior of the chest is a vile boggart no bigger than a cat. It has eyes like little glass buttons and a mouth full of sharp yellow teeth. You notice that it has a pinch of something like snuff in its bony hand, and it seems to have been intending to throw this in your face. On discovering that you are still protected by the Helm, it curses in a surprisingly deep voice and tries to scramble away. But you are quicker. Slamming the lid back down, you snare the hem of its musty cloak and in the next moment you have a firm grip on the loathsome little creature.

'Let me go! Let me go!' it cries. 'Release me, mortal, and I'll grant three wishes.'

If you agree to that, turn to 41

If you keep hold of the boggart, turn to 53

If you throw it down into the pit, turn to 65

125

'Any fool or faerie can make such a claim,' snaps Hordris, 'but can you prove it? Demonstrate to me that you are no monster in wizardly disguise by answering my conundrum. *While in Palestine, I came upon a Genoan and a Venetian sitting in a caravanserai. The Genoan had five loaves of bread and the Venetian had three, and since I was hungry they agreed to share their meal with me. We all ate equally, I'd venture to say, and at the conclusion of the meal I gave them eight copper groats to pay for the food I had eaten. The Venetian claimed they should split this equally, my apprentice said the Genoan should have five coins and the Venetian three, while the Genoan himself wanted to keep seven of the coins. Who was right?*'

- 'The Venetian?' Turn to 30
- 'The Genoan?' Turn to 42
- 'Or the apprentice?' Turn to 54

126

No sooner have you stepped through the door than a hunchbacked goblin leaps out at you. It is armed with a bronze shortsword and there are flecks of rabid saliva over its sallow chin.

- If you use a SHIELD spell, turn to 138
- If you use a MJOLLNIR spell, turn to 150
- If you have neither of these (or decide against using them), turn to 7

127

The RUST spell eats away the metal bars in moments. Beyond lies a gloomy chamber with dank walls.

Swathes of cobwebs hang from the vaulting. Not without trepidation, you step inside.

Turn to 20

128

She cries out in her sleep – a wretched, bloodchilling cry – and shrivels away before your eyes. Soon there is nothing left of her but a pile of dank ash. You retrieve the crucifix and wipe it clean before going to see to Mellisandre.

Turn to 33

*129

As you open the door, the handle comes off in your hand. You may as well keep it if you can carry any more items; you are allowed a maximum of five, remember.

The corridor in which you find yourself is musty and cobwebbed. Rats scurry away as you advance. After a while you come to a small wooden doorway on your right. The door looks to be quite thick, but you can still make out the sounds of some commotion from beyond it.

- If you open the door, turn to 34
- If you continue past it, turn to 46

130

The undead creature is too strong for you. With one claw-like hand around your neck and the other around the nun's, it rises unstoppably from its grave. Long ivory fangs glisten in the lamplight and there is a spurt of blood as they pierce the nun's throat. She struggles for a moment and then goes limp.

The vampire turns to you with a ghastly bloodrimmed smile; now it is your turn . . .

131

The mysterious knight is taken aback by your sudden attack. Just as he reaches for you with his gauntleted hands, you deliver a smashing blow that sends him flying back across the chamber. He hits the far wall with stunning impact, and you are amazed to see him swallowed up in a gout of red fire. This fire blazes for a moment, then burns away leaving no trace of the invidious Seigneur des Mouches.

Now you can leave this chamber.

If you take the left-hand door, turn to 12

If you try the central door, turn to 36

If you decide on the right-hand door, turn to 48

132

Strong hands take hold of your arms and turn you around. You are face to face with a strange knight in black and yellow livery whose helmet, like your own, is horned.

'What have we here?' he muses. 'A little mortal. Would you like me to take you on a trip?'

You follow his gaze down into the black depths below the grille. 'What's down there?' you ask him, trying to conceal your fear.

His laugh is not a pleasant sound. 'Paradise,' he answers; then adds after a pause, 'but it is well known that I always lie . . .'

Smashing down with his hoofed foot, he breaks the bars of the grille and the two of you plummet down and down into the void. You may think that plunging forever through darkness is the worst fate you could imagine, but in that case you are due for a rude awakening . . .

133

'By Thunder, that's not a bad idea!' he cries. Taking a sharp knife from his belt, he slices up the meat and is soon settling down to a plate of juicy steaks. He devours one after another of these, washing them down contentedly with great gulps of mead, but saves the last to give to you. Make a note of this item of food.

'Want a job as cook?' he asks, burping and wiping his sleeve across his mouth. When you explain that you are on a quest, he shrugs and touches your hand with his warhammer. A tingling runs up your arm. 'This'll give you one use of a MJOLLNIR spell,' he explains. 'Use it when you really need to land a knockout punch.'

Thanking him, you press on further into the dungeon.

Turn to 121

134

'Aha!' says the old man, winking his single eye. 'The pool of Fate, eh? A weird choice, if you'll pardon the pun.'

The filled bottle counts as one item. You can drink it anytime that you need to make a die roll, and it enables you to succeed in the roll automatically. It can only be used once, of course. Bidding the old man goodbye, you continue on your way.

Turn to 74

135

'I'm no cheat,' you tell them. 'Certainly not as blatant a cheat as you are, Scumbore.' You glare at the ogre you heard called by that name.

'You worthless little turnip,' snarls Scumbore. 'For that, I'm going to pull your fingers off one by one and stuff 'em up your nose.'

'You just hold on, Scumbore,' says one of the others, grabbing his shoulder as he starts forward.

'Yeah,' says another. 'This mortal saw you cheating as well. I want my money back, you fungus-faced swindler!'

'But I didn't—' protests Scumbore as the others start to shove him around. You slip away while a full-scale brawl is developing.

Turn to 121

136

Now you have the problem of getting back across the pit. At least there is more room for a run-up on this side.

If you use an EAGLE'S PINIONS spell, turn to 148

If you jump, turn to 5

137

The sorcerer blinks and rubs his eyes. 'May the Furies curse me for a soft-hearted fool!' he moans. 'I should have slain the goblin when I first clapped eyes on it, instead of giving it time to work its magic.'

While he rants to himself, you make your way invisibly to the other side of the room.

Turn to 66

138

You recite the spell just in the nick of time, causing the goblin's blow to rebound off an invisible force-field. Before it can recover its balance, you back out of the door and hurry on your way.

Turn to 114

139

The spell gives your bare fist the smashing power of the Thunder-God's warhammer. It only lasts a short time, but that is long enough for you to pummel the lock to smithereens. Swinging open the gate, you step uneasily into the dank chamber beyond.

Turn to 20

140

You sprinkle the dust all over her grotesque face. She snores loudly but does not wake even when you try shouting close to her ear. Now you must free Mellisandre before the effect of the sleep dust wears off.

Turn to 33

141

'That's funny,' replies Motley, 'you don't look like one.' He roars with laughter at this rather lame witticism and clouts you on the shoulder in an over-familiar way. 'Eh?' he insists. 'Good one, eh?'

Will you respond by laughing along with him (turn to 10), or by telling him that he's an insolent oaf (in which case turn to 153)?

*142

The girl tells you that she is Sister Lucienne, one of an order of nuns devoted to the hunting down and extermination of vampires. She strikes you as being very young for such work, but she is obviously enthusiastic and capable.

'Here,' she says, handing you a shark's tooth amulet from around the cadaver's neck, 'you might like to keep this as a memento.'

Note down the shark's tooth if you decide to keep it. Sister Lucienne also shares her provisions with you – plain fare, but very nourishing. You can restore one lost Life Force grade if wounded.

Bidding Lucienne farewell, you continue deeper into the dungeon.

Turn to 46

143

You raise your left arm and cast a little of the salt across it into his eyes. He reacts as though you had sprayed him with acid, clutching his face and giving vent to inhuman snarls of pain. 'Desist! Desist!' he shrieks. 'Only desist, and I'll render you aid in your quest.'

Menacing him with the rest of the salt, you reply, 'I want no aid of the sort you'd give, false knight. Only tell me this: which route is best from here?'

He glares at you through tears of pain. 'The safest door is the central one,' is all he says. Then, starting to recover his sight, he advances on you with an expression of purest hatred.

If you throw the remaining salt into his face, turn to 60

If you brandish a crucifix, turn to 24

If you cast the MJOLLNIR spell, turn to 131

144

The room fades around you, and you find yourself back in the dungeon antechamber. Treguard stands here with his arms folded behind his back. When you hold out the key towards him, he just shakes his head sadly. 'You have failed in the test, youngster,' he says. 'I warned you that the Knightmare Challenge

was as much a test of Chivalry as of cunning. Return and try again when you have had time to reflect and gain wisdom.'

145

He scratches his head. 'You think that will help?'

After he has loaded several armfuls of logs on the fire (and an armful to him is a barrow-load to anyone else) the room is filled with blinding smoke.

'Faugh!' roars the giant, coughing furiously. 'Wait till I get my hands on you, you prankster – then I'll let you know what I think of your meddlesome suggestion!'

You take the opportunity to slip away while his eyes are watering.

Turn to 121

146

The filled bottle counts as one item. 'Drink it any time,' says the old man. 'It'll give you one use of any spell you want – even one you've never heard of.' Suddenly he goes into a coughing fit that ends with him spitting a goblet of yellow phlegm into the pool. How vile; you hope he didn't do anything like that before you filled the bottle. Bidding him goodbye, you continue on your way.

Turn to 74

147

You fumble with the latch, but the door will not budge.

'It helps to have the key,' says one of the ogres, menacing you with his club.

'Yeah – and to think humans call *us* dumb!' says another.

They are closing in with their weapons raised to strike.

If you have a SHIELD spell you had better use it now
– turn to 4

If not, they make mincemeat of you. Literally.

148

You made a good choice earlier when you took water from the pool of Wisdom. It is the only way you could have got access to this rare spell. As you drink the contents of the bottle, you gain temporary magical knowledge. The enchantment causes wings to sprout from your shoulders and you fly across the pit. The moment you land on the other side, the wings slough away.

You can keep the empty water-bottle if you wish (it still counts as one item), as you continue down to the next level.

Turn to 52

149

You cast the spell and rush up to him, fists flying. 'I'm no goblin!' you cry. 'Maybe this'll knock some sense into you, you pompous oaf!'

Hordris is wide-eyed in horror, but manages to vanish in a puff of smoke a split-second before your punch lands. You probably didn't need to use the spell, since he obviously had no stomach for a fight. Good riddance to him.

Turn to 66

150

The spell charges your fist with the power of Thor's legendary mallet. It lasts only a moment, but that is long enough to administer a right uppercut that wipes the mad grin off the goblin's face. While it lies senseless, you search it and discover a mousetrap and a piece of chalk. You can also take its shortsword if you wish.

The room has no other exits, and seems to be the well of a very deep pit leading from the level above. Probably the goblin was in the habit of looting the bodies of people who fell down here, then eating them raw. You consider finishing it off while it lies at your feet – but there is no honour in slaying an unconscious foe, and in any case you have more important things to do. Leaving, you continue along the tunnel.

Turn to 114

151

It takes some time, but you finally manage to chisel open the link of the padlock. Just as you administer the last stroke, unfortunately, the chisel snaps and you must discard it. Still, at least you got the lock off. You swing the gate open and step into the cold, clammy chamber on the other side.

Turn to 20

152

She is instantly awake and springs up like a jack-in-the-box, spitting curses. Roll a die.

If you score a 1 or 2, the clout you gave the witch is so painful that she runs off. Turn to 33

If you score a 3 or 4, she rakes you with her talons

causing the loss of one Life Grade, but you manage to run away. Turn to 45

If you roll a 5 or 6, she paralyzes you with a spell and you are destined to be her next torture victim.

153

'Oh well, please yourself,' he grunts before going back to his juggling. As you leave, you think you hear him mutter something like 'sourpuss', but you cannot be sure – and in any case you don't have time to teach the churl any manners right now.

Turn to 93

154

Sir Aspen flicks back his cloak contemptuously when he sees you cast the spell and approach. 'Northmen's magic,' he sneers. 'The brute unsubtle force of the Thunderer. It will avail you nothing, mortal.'

He is trying to distract you long enough for the spell's power to wear off, but you are wise to such faerie tricks. You lash out with a mighty roundhouse punch. Roll the die.

On a roll of 1 or 2, you manage to connect with Aspen's jaw, knocking him senseless – turn to 23

On a roll of 3 or more, however, he dodges nimbly aside and then stabs you to death with his spear.

155

There is really no choice to make. You seize the lead key, letting the other slide off into the pit. You may have expected that Malice would be gleeful at seeing you fail in your quest, but instead she screams in

rage. As you unlock the crystal casket and free Pickle, Malice stamps her foot to create a cloud of sorcerous smoke into which she vanishes.

A strange sensation comes over you. Looking around, you see the outlines of the room melt away like a faded painting. Now, to your immense relief, you find yourself back in the dungeon antechamber. Treguard is standing here beside the hearth, massive shoulders silhouetted against the crackling fire in the grate. He nods a greeting as Pickle joins him, then turns to you.

'I have failed,' you say, downcast. 'I failed to get the key.'

Treguard booms with laughter. 'Failed? Not a bit of it! You succeeded most admirably, my young friend. What kind of knight would it be, after all, who valued a mere trinket of treasure above the life of an innocent? You passed the most important test of all – you stayed true to Chivalry, and you will pass from these portals as a true Champion of Knightmare!'